

Linus Asong

STRANGER IN HIS HOMELAND



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Langaa Research & Publishing CIG
Mankon, Bamenda

Publisher:
Langa RPCIG
Langa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Region
Cameroon
Langaagrp@gmail.com
www.langa-rpcig.net

Distributed outside N. America by African Books Collective
orders@africanbookscollective.com
www.africanbookscollective.com

Distributed in N. America by Michigan State University Press
msupress@msu.edu
www.msupress.msu.edu

ISBN: 9956-616-46-X

©Linus T. Asong 2010
First Published 2007
By Patron Publishing House, Bamenda

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Content

Part One

Chapter One	3
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three	19

Part Two

Chapter Four.....	27
Chapter Five	35
Chapter Six	45
Chapter Seven	49
Chapter Eight	59
Chapter Nine	65
Chapter Ten	71
Chapter Eleven	75
Chapter Twelve	85

Part Three

Chapter Thirteen.....	101
Chapter Fourteen	107
Chapter Fifteen	119
Chapter Sixteen	125
Chapter Seventeen	131
Chapter Eighteen	137
Chapter Nineteen	143

Part Four

Chapter Twenty	153
Chapter Twenty-One	157
Chapter Twenty-Two	167
Chapter Twenty-Three	171
Chapter Twenty-Four	185
Chapter Twenty-Five	193
Chapter Twenty-Six	203
Chapter Twenty-Seven	209

Part Five

Chapter Twenty-Eight	219
Chapter Twenty-Nine	225
Chapter Thirty	233
Chapter Thirty-One	243
Chapter Thirty-Two	253

Part Six

Chapter Thirty-Three	261
Chapter Thirty-Four	263
Chapter Thirty-Five	273
Chapter Thirty-Six	277
Chapter Thirty-Seven	283
Chapter Thirty-Eight	287
Chapter Thirty-Nine	293

Part Eight

Chapter Forty	299
Chapter Forty-One	303
Chapter Forty-Two	309
Chapter Forty-Three	317
Chapter Forty-Four	321
Chapter Forty-Five	325
Chapter Forty-Six	331

Part Nine

Chapter Forty-Seven	337
Chapter Forty-Eight	349

There was in him a vital scorn of all
As if the worst had fallen which could befall,
He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled

(Lord Byron: **LARA**)

For Pa Daniel Awungnjia

(of blessed memory)

Whose harsh discipline converted
my wild imagination into a fine art

Chapter One

The death of Chief Fuo-Ndee and the decision that Antony would succeed him had been received by the District Officer of Small Monje as a welcome blessing. While the old Chief lived, there was always conflict of one sort or other. Together with his councillors, he constituted a stumbling block to any changes which came in the wake of the establishment of the District Office to replace the defunct Chief's Council.

They, for instance, never saw any reasons for contributing for the construction of roads, if the roads were not to pass in front of the house of each councillor. Many argued fervently that vehicles killed children and that the coming of roads would mean an end to their race. They saw no reasons for the construction of a Health Centre. They, the sons of native doctors were still alive and strong. The herbs were still available. Why then waste money when it would cost them next to nothing to get cured?

They would not contribute money for the construction of schools. They knew enough, and had imparted on their children the knowledge of hunting or making of crafts or even trading, which they thought were the only things worth knowing in order to survive in the world. School, they would argue, was only the white man's method of making them forget their tradition which he had found too superior and too hard to imitate.

Thus when the people brought Antony's picture and name to the D.O. to say that he would be the next he saw no reason to object. Such an enlightened Chief would act as an invaluable liaison between the people and the government. He was therefore anxious to ingratiate himself with the Chief designate as soon and as thoroughly as possible.

When Antony came down for the funeral the D.O. invited him to his residence for a sumptuous supper. He offered Antony a sleeping place in his house, and Antony spent the last two days of

his stay in Small Monje with him. Before he left, the D.O. told him that he should feel perfectly free to come and live with him whenever he came down to Small Monje on a weekend.

During that visit too he told the D.O. how he had been maliciously deprived of the office of "*Surveillant General*" through the agency of his boss. The D.O. had sympathised with him very much and had joined Antony in condemning Zaché. With the receipt of a letter from Anuse in Likume, however, the DO's attitude towards Antony changed drastically. From the pinnacle of respect where he had previously placed Antony, the latter suddenly assumed the nature of an extremely self-opinionated and obstinate gentleman. The D.O. wondered how Antony would be able to rule and command the respect of the people.

Yet, he was still to see Antony's real problems. In fact, as the Biongongs would say, *he had started bending when the door was far off*. He was still to learn of Antony's dismissal from the government service.

The DO did not give Antony the usual enthusiastic welcome when he arrived at his residence that day. He simply shook his hand and asked the steward to attend to him. Then he retired to his study, very embittered by what he took as a deliberate lack of respect on Antony's part in bringing a girl to live in his house. He imagined that Mercy must be a whore he picked up on his way there.

Mercy was very tired and they hastily had to prepare a sleeping place for her in the visitor's room where they were to spend the night. And while she slept Antony remained in the DO's parlour. He took out the file containing his manuscripts and made a few additions and subtractions in certain areas. Then he decided that he would go to the palace and announce his arrival.

If nothing had happened to upset his mind Antony would have taken greater care of his much-cherished manuscripts. But he was not yet himself. He placed the file on one of the cupboards and told the DO that he was going to the palace for a while to see the Elders.

The DO answered in his throat.

Returning to the parlour after Antony had gone the DO, forever a very inquisitive man, was attracted by the file on his cupboard. He came up to it and, out of sheer curiosity he began to throw the pages open. After turning over dozens of sheets containing information which only Antony himself could decipher, the man came across a carefully bound bundle of papers numbering up to 200 pages. On another sheet, a rather thicker one enclosing the others was written in very lettering:

HOW A PEOPLE DIE
A NOVEL
BY
ANTONY NKOALECK

This sharpened his curiosity. So Antony had written a book! As he turned over the pages an envelope fell out with four or five sheets attached to it. He picked it up and glanced at the address before returning it into the file. It said:

*United Publishers Ltd.
Broadway Ave. N.Y. 006632I
New York
U.S.A*

He looked at the attached sheets. It contained two letters. The first was from the publishers. The DO had often heard that writers made a lot of money. He wanted to see what Antony had published, and how much money he may have made. He read the letter:

We are in receipt of your letter of March 15, asking for information on our publishing procedure.

We usually recommend that writers submit two sample chapters of their work together with a synopsis of the whole piece if already completed. We study the submissions and then do one of several things: We could accept it outright, giving a precise date when the completed manuscript should reach us; or we could give suggestions for its improvement if we find that it has a potential; or if we find that it is basically unpublishable we could reject it entirely.

What we cannot do is to arrange for a secret means of smuggling a manuscript out of the countries of authors, especially those with whom we have had no previous dealings at any really important commercial level...."

Here the DO turned over the pages. What could Antony have written about that he wanted it sent out of the country so secretly, he wondered. He soon found Antony's own letter to the publishers.

Dear Editor;

In compliance to your letters of May 13, I am sending you here the summary and sample chapters of my novel. As I said before, it is an anatomy of corruption in this country. And you will find that I have used the names of various guilty government officials as chapter headings..."

The DO swiftly turned to one of the sample chapters. One of the characters seemed to be talking to himself:

"...Something had to be done about it, now that even the army has gone to sleep. Lawyers flourish in their hundreds, while justice disappears. The poor continue to grow poorer, the rich, richer. Ministers swindle government funds and allow their relatives to establish fantastic enterprises, while the government itself cannot even build a village bridge without a bill of parliament.

The inconvenience caused to the individuals and their families, and the setbacks in the administration by constantly interrupting well-meaning plans for development by senseless mean nothing to anybody. THEY only thing of remaining in power.

In the provinces especially they have handed over the administration to District Officers, a bunch of illiterates whose main concern is to amass wealth at the expense of the development of the areas of their jurisdiction. They sleep with people's wives and daughters as though..."

At this point the DO heard the noise of Antony's car. He quickly closed the file and placed it back the way he had found it. He did not return to his study. He sat in the parlour contemplating on a way by which to have Antony's file officially confiscated and destroyed.

"I have seen them, sir," Antony told him as he entered the house.

"Him," the DO grunted indifferently.

"Everything is going according to plan," Antony beamed.

"Hmm," the DO grunted again, looked at Antony tightened his lips but said nothing. After a few minutes of silence he asked Antony what his plans for the future were. "Will you resign to come and be a full-time Paramount Chief as you hinted the other time, or will you choose somebody to take care of affairs here in your absence, so that you can only come down for cases of emergency?"

Antony was surprised. Was it possible that the DO had not yet heard about his dismissal? In that case, could he not keep it a secret? But why hide what was condemned to be known? Besides, what did he stand to lose by telling the DO about it?

“Now that I am no longer with the government, I will be the full-time Paramount chief.”

The DO thought he had not heard him right.

“You are no longer with the government?” he asked. Not at all,” Antony replied.

“You mean you have resigned already?”

Antony was silent for a very long time and then he asked:

“You have not yet heard of the latest punishment for honesty?”

“Latest punishment for what?”

How else can I put it? I returned to Sigili-Mundu last month to hear that I had been dismissed.”

He took out a copy of the dismissal letter and gave it to the DO to read. The DO opened it and read it over and over again. Then he said:

“This is serious, you know?”

Antony smiled as though it did not matter, and had never mattered at all. He then said:

“Well, if you say so. I don’t see it as such because it only gives me time to concentrate on my responsibilities as Chief, and to do many other things.”

The DO shrugged, and then he inquired:

“What did you really do in that place to warrant such a decision to be taken against you?”

“Nothing. Just nothing,” Antony told him emphatically. “If they have any reason at all it should be only that I listened to the voice of my conscience and did my work honestly. This is the only country in the continent of Africa which considers honesty as the worst policy.”

With his mind warped and poisoned by the news of Antony’s dismissal the DO saw everything he said only in the light of the enemy of the state. In his mind he swore that Antony would not be allowed to be Chief.

“Who is the lady with you?” he asked from an angle.

“She is my wife. Her name is Mercy. She is Monshi,” Antony added unnecessarily to complete the introduction.

“You are really married to her?”

“Of course,” Antony said. “I am not used to making irresponsible statements.”

Always anxious to prove his point, Antony then searched the breast pocket of his jacket and drew out a copy of the marriage certificate they had established in Atule, and handed it over to the DO. The man took it and after going through it for a very long time remarked rather casually:

“You are twice married, it seems.”

“When I divorced Vicky I got married to this girl.”

“You were married in court, I guess?” The DO inquired.

Antony nodded.

“And you divorced in court?”

“No. It was a mutual agreement. We agreed that we should separate, and then we destroyed the certificate.”

It sounded really criminal in the DO’s ears. He knew Antony was telling blatant lies because he had right there in one of his files Vicky’s copy of the certificate. He scrutinised the new certificate Antony had given him for a while and then he pointed out:

“And this one is marked MONOGAMY”

“That’s what we preferred before the law.”

“And as paramount Chief how would you get on? The government ought to take the number of your wives into very serious consideration. It is on the strength of this that you will be paid your family allowance.”

Antony was silent. He had made a monumental error, he thought briefly. At any rate he had not willingly chosen to marry again. It had been done under duress.

“And besides, do you not think you will have some trouble with your people? Will they be glad to see their chief marry only one wife?”

Antony was once more silent. Then he stirred in his chair as if struck with a sudden pain. He sat up, pressed his hands over his eyes, his face dropped and then he said:

“They don’t know about this marriage yet. And I won’t let them until after I am crowned. I don’t even want them to know that I came down with her.”

“Except so,” the DO said, feigning disinterest. “But even then, the monogamy will still cause you some problems.”

Antony remained silent for one whole minute, and said reflectively:

"I have made a mistake, sir." There was a strong emphasis on the word "SIR" which the DO quickly understood as a sign of ingratiation. Antony tried to take the certificate back but the DO, pretending to study it, retained it without creating any obvious suspicion.

"It is really a serious mistake," the DO said. "For one thing, it is only the court that has the right to nullify a civil status act like a marriage certificate."

There was a long silence during which Antony held down his head.

"And I don't see how easy it would be for you to get any kind of allowance with a certificate marked MONOGAMY," the DO said.

"Is there anything or any way out of this kind of situation?" Antony inquired in a worried and stammering voice. Hysteria had entered his voice.

The DO shook his head in denial, implying that the problem was not an easy one to solve. "If there is any way out it could, or, might only lie in your giving up this girl too, if you really want to be Chief."

Antony bit his lower lip and scratched his chin as if an ant had entered his nest of a beard. The element of doubt in the DO's words regarding his impending coronation horrified him.

"I cannot give her up, sir" he said lamely. He wanted to add that it would go against his principles. But even the very word principles seemed now to frighten him. "can't you, as a friend and as a senior government official do something about it?" he inquired.

"By which you mean?" the DO asked, glad that Antony himself had realised that he was at his mercy.

"Can you not help me change this monogamy to polygamy?" he asked. The request terrified even Antony himself. The dismissal, his marriage with Mercy, the plight of Vicky, and the threat that hung in the air in every word that the DO uttered, completely robbed his mind of all the notions of *principles* by which he lived.

It all seemed to him to be a dream. Furthermore, the urgency with which the DO was demanding answers did not leave him with any room to reflect on the full implications of his words.

“I have heard of cases,” he went on, “where documents have been changed like this before.”

The DO remained silent for some time and then inquired”

“With or without your present wife’s permission?”

“It is a favour I am asking of you, sir...” he tried to plead.

“I don’t deny that it is,” the DO told him. “I only want to understand.”

“Without her knowledge,” Antony said, cursing himself and the whole world for having reduced him to the circumstances in which he would have to be so mean.

“In that case you must make a formal application, in writing, which I will attach to your original certificate. I must have some documentary evidence for any such action.”

Chapter Two

Before *Antony* retired to his room later that evening, the DO had already made up his mind about him. He was NOT to be the new Chief of Small Monje, and the Elders in the palace needed to know about that change before they went to bed that night. He knew it would not be easy to convince the old men about the rightness of his action. But he was determined to use every weapon at his disposal, to use brute force, if necessary, to carry through the decision.

Two policemen accompanied him to the palace. He parked his Land-Rover outside the gate and they descended into the palace. Two men who had heard the noise of his vehicle up at the gate met them as they entered the palace grounds.

“Good evening, goment,” they greeted. They called the DO and any other government officials *goment*.

The DO did not answer. He looked round the group and asked:

“Where is Ngobefuo?”

“In the *Ndie-Ndee*, goment,” somebody said.

“What of the other Elders? Are they asleep already?”

“Nobody had slept, goment,” he was told. “When we are catching a Chief we do not sleep. They are all there,” the man said. He suspected no problem.

“Lead me there,” the DO said gravely. “I want to talk to them.”

The DO very rarely came to the palace. In fact, he had never been known to come there in the night. It was already eleven o'clock, and the old men viewed his presence with very great trepidation.

“Welcome, goment,” Ngobefuo greeted for all of them.

“Evening,” the DO answered with a gloomy nod. He was then shown where to sit, but he did not sit down. From his standing position he pointed to Ngobefuo and said in the same severe tone:

“Ngobefuo, I would like to speak to you and those who choose the Chief for this tribe.”

There was silence, abrupt and dismal. The old men detected a grave error on the part of the DO. Ngobefuo cleared his throat and spoke:

“Goment, nobody here chooses a Chief. We only catch him. The father of our new Chief chooses him before he dies. And after he has died we bring the people together as we are going to do tomorrow and **catch** him. That is what we do.”

“I want to speak to you and those who **catch** the new Chief.”

“We are all here,” Ngobefuo said and pointed round at his kinsmen. The DO tightened his lips, swallowed his spittle loudly and then said:

“I have come here this late hour to tell you that Antony Nkoaleck cannot be made the Chief any more. We have to change the succession and place it on any other of the Chief’s sons.”

The expression on the faces of the Elders was one of outrage.

“We do not understand you, goment,” Ngobefuo said, pulling his stool up towards the DO.

“How don’t you understand me?”

“We don’t understand you because Fuo-Ndee did not die yesterday. You have not just been told that Nkoaleck will be caught as the new Chief. When Fuo-Ndee died, we came up to you with Nkoaleck’s name and showed you and we told you that he was the one Fuo-Ndee had chosen to occupy his chair of rule. You said you agreed. You said you were glad. When he came down to put his father in the grave he was with you. You still said you were glad with him. And now you are singing a different song. That is why I said we do not understand you.”

“I will explain...”

“You will explain, goment. But after you shall have explained, we shall say ‘no’. And we shall say no because Fuo-Ndee has already died. We shall say no because we never break a dead Chief’s word. Never. We shall say no because we are only midwives of this tribe. A midwife delivers only the child that is in the womb of a woman, not any other child he likes. That is why we shall say no. If you asked us to bend his word, that would have been different.”

The DO rubbed his hands together and then asked:

“When do you bend a Chief’s word?”

“Goment, we bend a Chief’s word when the child he has chosen dies without choosing his successor, or when he dies at the same time with his father. In that case, we the Elders of the council meet and decide over the dead Chief’s bones, to give the chair of rule to some other person near in blood to the man the Chief had chosen. That is how we *bend* it. But to break it, to take the chair of rule from the man he had chosen, and give to somebody else, even his brother of the same womb, while the chosen man is still alive! Goment, the oath of *ku-ngang* forbids us.” When he finished talking and looked round into the faces of the others they all answered in one voice:

“It is like that, goment.” The voices sounded angry and very uncompromising.

The DO, most interestingly, had anticipated resistance. He paused and then said:

“I cannot deny that I once agreed that Antony Nkoaleck was good to be Chief. But things have changed which now make it imperative for us to reconsider our original decision.”

The people did not react.

“He tore a government’s document...”

“Goment has said that to us before.”

“And I will want to say here again. That girl killed herself after Antony visited her and spoke to her. And it might interest you to know that the forces of law and order are still looking very seriously into that matter. Then he has been dismissed from the government service...”

“He has not been dismissed, goment,” Ngobefuo said.

“He himself says he does not want to work again. He wants to rule his people.”

“And even if it is not true, goment,” another Elder stepped in. “If he has been dismissed, it is not our worry. We lived for hundreds of years in the tribe without knowing about the work of the goment. We had our Chiefs and they never lacked anything. We have our daughters to sell, we have goats, oil, cows, coffee, pigs, all things. As our Chief he will lack nothing.”

“What he earns or how he eats is not what concerns me right now,” the DO said.

“Then what concerns you, goment?” Ngobefuo inquired indignantly.

“They very fact that he should be Chief,” the DO responded. “The paramount Chief of Small Monje here has a seat in the National House of Chiefs. As an accompaniment of that office, therefore, he has to attend very important meetings on State Affairs in Tetsale. He has to receive Ministers and Governors and V.I.P’s visiting this district. He has to sign important documents on government projects to be put up here. So you see, therefore, that this is not a responsibility that can be entrusted into the hands of somebody who has been dismissed from the service of this same government.

Ngobefuo swallowed loudly, shook the tobacco out of his pipe and returned the pipe to its spot over his right ear. The DO continued:

“This same Antony Nkoaleck once held a position of responsibility as the Master of Discipline of his college. This office he managed so poorly that he was relieved of it the same year. These are the considerations which have brought me here this night. The government is certainly not against your having a Chief. But it will go to any extent to prevent Antony Nkoaleck from becoming Chief. And if you insist and choose him...”

“And **catch** him, goment,” Ngobefuo corrected him angrily.

“If you catch him or do whatever you intend to do,” the DO said impatiently, he will be dismissed immediately.” He paused for a while and then said: ‘The Chief had very many children.’”

“The Chief had very many children, goment, but only one could be Chief: Nkoaleck. The only two others who could have succeeded him if nothing had happened were Nji and Nchindia. But they cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Nji slept with his father’s wife. Nji and Nkoaleck were of the same age. And until it happened, he was the one our father had chosen to succeed him. Fuo-Ndee did not visit his mother twice before having him.

The DO moved uneasily in his chair. Ngobefuo hastened to explain: “A young girl, a virgin who was to wash the Chief’s feet when he was dead had been brought to live in the Chief’s palace

towards his last days. Upon his death she was to be used for washing the new Chief's *Leukot* on the day he was caught. She was thus the wife of the dying chief while he lived, and the wife of the new Chief after he shall have been caught. Nji was caught using the girl.

That was a crime because he had slept not only with his father's wife but also with the Chief's wife. As I said, his father was still alive, and Nji away from the palace. He was never to come back, even to mourn for him. That was curse. He told the Elders to call off the mourning if against his orders Nji forced himself into the palace."

"Goment," Ngobefuo concluded, "for us, we take a dying man's words seriously. And from a dying Chief, they are law." He paused for a while and then said in a voice that barely rose above a whisper: "All of us to whom Fuo-Ndee spoke those words are still alive. Here we are sitting in front of you. Goment, what kind of curse is there which you think our fathers will not cause to fall on this whole world if we, the same people, call this boy now and catch him as Chief?"

The DO did not answer.

"If the web of our lives is to be broken," Ngobefuo went on, "if should not be by us and in our own life-time."

"What did you say was wrong with the other son Nchindia?" the DO asked sourly.

Ngobefuo motioned to Achiebefuo to explain.

"Long before Nchindia was born," he began, "Fuo-Ndee had been told, and he agreed that none of the children he would have with Nchindia's mother will ever lay claim to anything in this tribe. His mother was the child of a man who had slept with his sister of the same father. That was why they insisted that nobody was qualified to rule except Nkoaleck."

The DO had been listening very attentively. But he was determined to have his way. He changed his strategy. He rose and went out where he conferred with his three policemen. Moments later the officers fired warning shots into the trees up at the gate, bringing down half the branches. In that dark night the shots sounded and resounded throughout the entire Small Monje like the explosions of some canon.

When the DO returned he was pleased to notice that the people had received his message. With the exception of Ngobefuo they had all taken cover in various corners of the hall where they cowered, trembling.

"I don't want to use force to do anything on this land," the DO said. "I have come for us to dialogue over this matter and seek amicable ways of resolving the issue."

The other old men returned to their seats. Now that the people were sufficiently frightened the DO decided to proceed by concentrating mainly on Antony's faults, particularly those which he knew touched the most sensitive spot in their entire existence – their tradition. He knew that he had all the evidence which if cleverly used could drive even the most die-hard traditionalist amongst them to paroxysms of rage. He inquired:

"Let me know, Ngobefuo, do you people not have any rules or laws which govern the conduct of your Chiefs?"

"If Goment had listened to what I have been saying about Nji and Nchindia Goment should not have asked me that."

"I listened."

"Then why are you rubbing us with excrement up and down like this? We should have been having tomorrow's sleep now. Tomorrow will be a long day for us..."

"I know," the DO told him. "But that is no reason for you to think that I am insulting you. My feeling about it is that, if what you have been explaining is important at all, it should only mean that you ignore immediate faults of your princes and only refer back of unimportant history...."

"Goment, every part of our history is important," Achiebefuo countered.

"If every part of your history is important," the DO said, "then I advise you all sitting in here now not to ignore the ignominious role your supposed Chief Antony Nkoaleck has played in this society since his return from abroad. Then I will only ask you this one thing: Do you people not have any regulations that govern the marriage practices of your princes and Chiefs?"

"We have plenty."

The DO pulled a long envelope from his coat pocket and, as though it was his trump card, tapped it against his knee for a long time.

“Get me somebody who can read book,” he ordered.

The only person they could think of on the spur of the moment was Kevin Beckongncho who just came in the evening to attend the ceremony. Ngobefuo sent somebody to call for him. When Beckongncho came in the DO drew out the envelope with Antony’s marriage certificate and gave it to him to examine.

Beckongncho did so. When he came to the last line on the document the DO said:

“Please, do us the favour of telling your people in your vernacular exactly what you have read.”

Then he turned to Ngobefuo:

“And after he shall have explained it all to you, if you are still not convinced, send him to come to my residence and see for himself that Antony is in my house with the woman with whom he made that certificate.”

Beckongncho told the shocked Elders what the document said. Antony Nkoaleck, heir apparent and crown prince of the throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje had committed several errors: he had married from outside, he had also gone ahead to establish a marriage certificate marked MONOGAMY with his first marriage certificate still on the government file, and with hundreds of young women for the throne waiting for him to take them over.

Chapter Three

E*ven though* Beckongncho was a young man in whom the Elders had absolute trust, and even though he assured them all that the document was genuine, the old men refused to believe what their ears had heard. It was inconceivable that any prince of the royal line, and in his right senses, would ever commit such an atrocity. It was agreed that before they said anything further on the matter, Beckongncho should go with the DO to his house and confirm the last allegation – Antony's marriage situation.

It was already after midnight when the DO and Beckongncho reached his residence. He packed his vehicle in the garage and went round with Beckongncho to the room in which Antony and the wife were spending the night.

Antony had hardly slept. After that gruelling interview with the DO which had culminated in the handing over of his marriage certificate to him, sleep had suddenly disappeared from his eyes. He realised that he had behaved rather irresponsibly. This made him feel very ashamed of himself. But things had happened so fast he could scarcely stop to reflect on anything at the time he gave the document to the DO. And even now, it did not seem as if such a thing had actually taken place. He had to remind himself several times to believe it. These thoughts only helped to make him more anxious, more fearful and more irascible.

Could the DO succeed in changing the words? And if he could, was he ever going to be able to speak to him with his former pride? Had he not done the throne a disservice? What if the DO could not change it? Could he afford to rule as Chief without any family allowance? And what if in the process of changing it he was discovered and accused of fraud? And even if he were never

discovered by the law, what was Mercy going to think about him. Was he treating her fairly? Was that not a contradiction of the lecture he had delivered to her the night he was compelled to sign the certificate?

"Tomorrow ends all these worries," he told himself rather childishly. He could not sleep. He would sit over his manuscripts and wait for tomorrow, no matter how long it took.

It was while he sat waiting, feverish with anxiety and self-reproach, that he heard a knock on the door. He rose and hurried to open it. When he found that it was the DO he stood silent, expecting to hear that he had succeeded in changing the words.

"I found this gentleman on my way from office," the DO began rather abruptly. "He would like to see you."

Beckongncho had been standing a little in the dark that Antony did not notice him when he opened the door. As soon as the DO spoke he moved forward.

"Aaaah! Kevin!" he exclaimed, striding forward and seizing the visitor's hand and embracing him.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said to the DO. Then he turned to Beckongncho: "Kevin, how are you?"

"Fine, fine," he answered, suppressing the surprise in his mind at the shallowness of Antony's countenance. He looked so disconcertingly different from what he had always known him to be. It was almost as though Antony had already learned that he may after all not be the new Chief. When he spoke, his face looked distraught, and his voice carried an unusual strain of agitation which robbed it of all the confidence and conviction with which he had always expressed himself.

"Long time no see," Antony said.

"Yeah," Beckongncho nodded. "Too much word for everybody."

"How are things coming?"

"So-so," Beckongncho said.

"You came too for the catching-eh?"

"Yeah."

"How are preparations coming?"

"Just fine. No incidents yet."

Antony jolted.

"It will be hectic-eh?"

"Really hectic."

Antony burst into a long laughter. Then he turned to the DO: "Sir, when I talk of changing the face of Nkokonoko Small Monje, when I talk of breathing new life into this tribe, I am counting on the support of young men like this. He is a character. A noble pillar in the new generation. See, as late as this, he still feels it necessary to come and confer with me. Thank you for bringing him here. I will drive him back to the palace."

"Well, that's O.K. But in case you still feel very tired, I can always drop him on my way to the office. I have very much work to do there this night."

"O.K., sir," Antony said and bade him goodnight. He suspected nothing.

Tell me when you are ready to return," the DO told Beckongncho and then he went to his study.

"I just came to say hello, "Beckongncho began.

There was a sudden silence. Antony looked apprehensively over his shoulder into the room where Mercy was sleeping. He took a few steps forward, pulled the door and shut it. Then he took Beckongncho by the hand and the two went over to the lawn.

Beckongncho did not show any surprise. There Antony said:

"Will you believe me if I tell you that my marriage to Vicky Godsabi is all over?"

"Really?"

Sincerely. I think it was a real mistake for me to ever decide to marry that girl."

Well, perhaps you might have listened a bit more to advice. Perhaps you might have consulted some more reasonable people," Beckongncho said with mild reproach.

Antony grinned at the reproach.

My only consolation now is that I am comfortably married to a girl I love."

Married?"

"Sure. She is not from the tribe, though. But it's O.K. Better ride a cow that carries you to where you are going than a horse that will throw you off."

A smile of embarrassment played at the corners of Beckongncho's mouth and he shook his head. He pitied Antony who just then looked very mean and contemptible with every word

that he uttered. When he tied this to his determination to have Eru run his marriage in Likume the previous year he was convinced that a very vital screw was missing from Antony's head.

"Is it rumoured that you lost your job?" he inquired.

"Well, that's what the government says. It claims to have dismissed me, Kevin. For professional incompetence. Me, of all persons. That is the country we are building. To be great is to be grossly misunderstood."

Beckongncho stood silent with disappointment.

Antony switched bravado into his voice and then said

"Who knows if it was not just a way to make me a better Chief? There is a divinity that shapes our end."

The door behind them swung open and a woman came out and went into the lavatory nearby.

"That's my wife," Antony said. "A beautiful piece of a woman."

"Can I say hello to her?"

"Of course. Between us, Kevin, there is no secret."

On Mercy's return Antony went in with Beckongncho.

"Mercy, you meet a brother of mine, Kevin. He is a headmaster in the Council school in Sowa."

He turned to Beckongncho:

"Meet my wife, Mercy."

They shook hands and said at the same:

"I am please to meet you."

There was a brief silence and then Beckongncho said:

"Sorry to disturb you, sister. You must be very tired." Mercy smiled.

"I was very tired when I came. I have been sleeping since then. I even thought it is morning already." They all laughed. Then Beckongncho said:

"You don't look like somebody from the coast, do you?"

"Oh no. I am Monshi. From Atule."

Beckongncho returned with the DO without Antony suspecting anything. Back in the palace Beckongncho confirmed every detail of what had started off as rumour to the horrified assembly of Elders, even adding his own unsolicited opinion that it would be a very serious mistake to go ahead and catch Antony as the new Chief.

With the receipt of this last bit of information and with the echoes of the threatening gunshots still ringing in their ears, the Elders were forced to give the story of Antony's past, a more critical look. Rumours and eye-witness accounts of all sorts of accusations were assembled. The result was a history of consistent and unpardonable misconduct. So shocking did they find it that the use of any further force or threat became unnecessary as the DO had contemplated.

Even Ngobefuo resisted the weight of the testimony only because to yield without protest would be a contradiction of his role as arch-protector of the tradition of the tribe. The move that followed was unparalleled in the annals of the history of the people of Nkokonoko Small Monje. The DO was informed that the decision had been changed from Antony Nkoaleck to Nchindia Alexander.

Chapter Four

The night Antony returned to Likume from studies abroad two years ago, nobody could have thought that he would end this way. Not even he himself. He was everybody's idol, a god in his own right.

He knew by instant intuition as he sought his uncle's house that night that year that the Likume Urban Council may never have got out of its troubles! The roads linking one city to the other were usually done either by the Government or funded by international organisations. The beautifully tarred road from Liwara, therefore, did not enter Likume town. It ended just at the outskirts. As the tradition was, the tarring and maintenance of within-the-city roads was left in the hands of urban councils. The Likume Urban Council was a prey to may ills. Although the government gave subventions, monies for the development of the council roads generally came from taxes and other levies.

The appointment of the tax collectors and tax assessors lay in the hands of the mayors. Like any other major city in the country, Likume had never been blessed with a responsible mayor. The situation was complicated by the fact that the mayors were themselves government appointees, chosen by virtue of their allegiance to the status quo.

It was a system designed, consciously or unconsciously, to leave the council coffers empty. For one thing, the *appointers* knew how much the mayors stood to make from their offices. The mayor in turn knew how much needed to pay his overlord to continue to retain his post. They also knew how much they had to make for themselves. Thus, in the final analysis, after securing the job of the mayors, the council itself was never left with enough money to carry out the most rudimentary repairs on the roads.

It was for this reason that it took Antony close to one hour to travel by taxi from the lorry station to Hausa Quarters where Anuse lived, a distance of less than six kilometres. Mountains of soil

deposited in the middle of the road by council trucks had not been levelled to fill the pot holes that had widened into ponds. The roadside gutters had been filled with mud by rain water for want of proper care. Vehicles were forced to leave the main road and enter into people's compounds before rejoining the laterite track-of-a-road again. Sometimes, a driver discovered only when it was too late that there was no thoroughfare in the deviation into people's compounds. And, with other vehicles lined up bumper to bumper behind them, a detour was virtually impossible.

In spite of the state of the roads, Likume showed signs of very rapid development even before Antony left for further studies. And, even in the darkness, he could see that during the five years he was away very much had changed. Streets seemed to have widened, old houses pulled down here and there, and new ones erected in their places. Many more were in the process of being raised.

But what was uppermost in Antony's mind was the impending confrontation with his uncle. This made it difficult for him to fully appraise the magnitude of the changes. It was enough that he could still make out the street that led to Anuse's house. He recalled the concluding words of Anuse's letter:

"... So we are all waiting for you on Saturday the 25th of July as you have said. Everybody, the whole tribe will be there to see your aeroplane as it is coming down. We have made arrangements for more than five lorries to carry the people there to see you coming out. The women will be there to dance to welcome you. Your father our Chief will not be present personally, unless he is better by then. He is still very sick as I said. But even if he is not there he will send somebody to come in his name. I sent it to the radio and they have announced your coming many times already. I shall leave here in my own car that will bring you back here... Do not fail, Saturday afternoon, at 3 o'clock...."

Antony got off the taxi at the main road because it was dark and the taxi man did not want to go through Fence, the den of prostitution beyond which was located Anuse's residence. He had four pieces of luggage, a large suit case which he carried in his right hand, a leather brief case which he stuck under the right armpit, and two large handbags which he managed to carry in his left hand.

The house was some 500 meters away and so he had to stop after every few meters to ease the burden on him. In fact by the time he arrived he would be thoroughly soaked with perspiration.

Fence was still very much the way he had left it half a decade ago. On the verandas sat women of all ages, some so old and so ugly that they would not dare show their faces in the day light. From their benches and stools they greeted virtually every passer-by, beckoned to some, shouted out obscene insults and deprecations at those who, like Antony, did not seem to pay them any particular attention.

The route to Anuse's residence was not complicated in terms of direction, and so he easily found his way. Anuse had written to tell him how he had electrified the entire compound. It turned out to be true. The house stood some 15 metres from the by-road, separated first by a sinking gutter of about a meter wide that transported the wastes and other substances from fence, and then a small grass lawn, and finally sunning of cocoa and coffee. There was a long security bulb that shone from the gable end of the house near the garage illuminating the entire front yard right to the road.

Having first the suit case and then the handbags, he crossed the gutter and traversed the cemented space to the veranda. He came up to the veranda and put down his things. He could see Anuse's car in the garage to the upper end of the compound. There were also two other cars, a Renault 4 and a Citroen, parked along the road. He could hear voices in the sitting room, but he succeeded in bringing his things to the veranda after two trips without anybody observing him.

The sitting room window was open and he noticed that the curtain had not completely cut off a view of the people sitting inside from a keen intruder. He peeped through an opening along the side of the window where the curtain was not broad enough to reach the edge of the wall.

Anuse was sitting at the table in the centre of the parlour. In the middle of the floor stood a low table with several bottles of assorted drinks on it. About ten people sat conversing and drinking on chairs

which seemed to form a circle round the table. There were a few women too. Everybody was talking, drinking or laughing as it always was when people met in Anuse's house for a business transaction.

They had just been working on the last details concerning the trip that would be undertaken the following Saturday to receive Antony at the Liwara airport. It was going to be the very first time a child of Biongong blood had gone to the white man's country and was returning *in the womb of that lorry which travels only in the sky*. That was the way the Biongong called the aeroplane. They were all anxious not to miss the chance.

Anuse had exploited the situation to his personal gain while at the same time creating the impression that he had made an enormous personal sacrifice to satisfy the curiosity of his people. Liwara was some 300 kilometres from Likume and if they decided to go there individually, they would each spend at least 3,000 francs on the return fare alone. Anuse had contacted one of his rich comrades who owned buses that supplied Likume-Liwara. He had told the man how his only son was returning from Europe and so he would need to hire one or two buses to convey his tribesmen to the airport to welcome him. He had not charge Anuse for them. He had merely given them to him, telling him that he would be responsible for fuel. That was not likely to exceed 20.000 francs for entire trip.

Returning to his people, however, Anuse had demanded, as he put it, "a small thing of 1.500 francs, only petrol". That Thursday night when they gathered to make final arrangements, sixty people had already paid, and very many more were expected to pay the next day. In fact, he had announced that he was ready to lend money to any of his workers who was anxious to go. The debt, he said, would be deducted from the man's pay. This was another way of warning his workers that nobody should stay back on the pretext that he had no money. So, that night, he was already sure of 70.000 francs, even if nobody else paid thereafter.

Antony did not want to be caught looking in, so he peeped just long enough to see those who were in. Then he knocked.

"Yyyeesss, bring'am," Anuse rose very excitedly to the door. He was sure it was one of the natives bringing his own fare to augment his profit. He switched on the veranda life and pulled the window curtain aside. He had been whistling as he walked up to the window. But now he seemed to run out of breath, and he left his head hanging outside for a whole minute before withdrawing it.

The people senses that there was something amiss.

"What is that?" two people asked at once. Anuse cleaned the snuff from his nose with the back of his left hand, the way he always did when angered or embarrassed.

"Nothing," he said. It was more or less a growl. Then he told them: "Excuse me for a minute," He went out, shutting the door firmly behind him. For those who knew him it meant that he had something private to be discussed with whoever had just come.

At the veranda he did not answer Antony's greetings. He simply bent down and lifting Antony's suitcases in both hands led him to the edge of the compound where the light from the veranda could not reach. There he asked in a voice made hoarse with virulent anger.

"Nkoaleck, have you stolen somebody's wife from that your white man's country that you should come like this?"

"Why, papa?"

"Don't call me papa if you will not behave like my child. Thank God that it was my brother's penis that brought you into this world.... Did we not agree in letters that you will be coming this Saturday, tomorrow?" Anuse asked.

"We did, father."

"The Chief's men are there in the house who were to come with us. People have paid their money and are in there preparing to come for you. Nkoaleck, did you not agree with what I said in the letters?"

"I did," Antony admitted.

"Is today Saturday 25th July?"

"No pa..."

"Is this Liwara?"

Antony shook his head in denial and tried in vain to explain. Anuse's face underwent a sudden transformation into a study of fury. He stamped his foot and slapped his thigh as if killing a mosquito. At the same time, he blew his nose loudly, pulling down his mouth, rubbed his nose several times with the back of his hand, adjusted the folds of the loin-cloth he was wearing and then placing his hands at akimbo and said:

"Do not put the tribe to shame Nkoaleck. If you are still the same child that all Biongong gathered here five years ago to send to the white man's country, just take these bad luck things from here

and go back to Liwara. Go back there and wait for the people who sent you to bring you back here the way they want. If you lack transport money to take you there, tell me right away.”

Tired from the sheer exhaustion of the journey, what Antony felt he most needed was rest, not interrogation. Perspiration burst from his forehead and began coursing down. He wiped it with the back of his right hand and stood defiantly. Indignation was also welling up in his throat. Go back to Liwara? He asked himself. What an absurd, what a repulsive suggestion to make!

Antony stared at him in stony silence.

“It will be even better for them to meet you sitting at the entrance into the airport, without seeing the plane that brought you than to receive you here and now and in this manner...”

Anuse had a very loud coarse voice which he had cultivated through the years by constantly shouting at people and singing his own praises. He could not, therefore, avoid drawing the attention of the people who since he left the room had tuned their ears for the slightest sound from outside. While they stood gazing at each other in mutual astonishment, the door swung open. Some three men and a woman came out and stood at the veranda, looking round for Anuse.

“Wait for me in the house please, I said I am coming,” Anuse barked.

But that could not send them back into the house. One of the men, pretending not to hear him, went closer and then discovered the stranger.

“Nkoaleck has come!” he shouted hysterically to those who were still inside the house. There was little movement at first because they thought he must be drunk from the alcohol they had been drinking. But within seconds the whole group stormed out of the house. In the excitement that followed immediately, they set eyes on Antony; nobody tried any more to find out what Anuse was doing with him outside. They fell on Antony, hugging and encumbering him with kisses, almost shaking his hands out of the sockets as they cried and shouted at the top of their voices to neighbours:

“Nkoaleck has come! Our white man has come! The light of Biongong has come!”

Anuse tried to forget what he had just been saying and join in the excitement. It would not work. He withdrew and stood aside while they literally carried Antony on their shoulders, danced round the compound for over ten minutes before going into the house. Anuse pulled aside, searched the folds of his loin-cloth for his snuff-box, drew in three nail full into each nostril and shook his head vigorously. Then, shuffling the box back, he went in and changed into a pair of trousers and a light *jumpha* before returning to join the ecstatic friends and relatives who immediately started bombarding Antony with all kinds of questions.

They asked Antony questions about the white man's country, about the aeroplane, about the cinema and the like. But Antony's excitement seemed guarded. He knew he still had much to explain to Anuse whose morose silence amidst the jubilant crowd seemed to accentuate his apprehension.

It was a harmless question that brought the problem back to the table.

"But we thought our brother said that we should expect you only on Saturday..." somebody tried to ask.

"Yes sir, but I could not wait." Antony saw an opportunity and tried to clear himself.

"And why could you not wait?" Anuse stepped in.

"The time and date for flights to our country here was suddenly changed. The only possible flight coming here was last Wednesday night. The only other one was to come one month afterwards..."

"No matter," Anuse told him the same fierce tone. "You should have written."

"If I wrote, papa, you would not have received it y now. It was only a few days ago..."

"You should have sent a telegram..."

A neighbour quickly observed that Anuse's interrogation was threatening to disrupt the excitement of the moment.

"That is not the way to welcome a child my brother, the man intervened. "When you begin like this, that is the way you will continue," the neighbour said. "Let us hear something, that is why I asked. I was not lighting a fire between the two of you.

The man's suggestion found instant support with the rest of the group. Although everybody had been anxious to go and see Antony climb down from the aeroplane, for most of them, what they had

contributed had caused them very great strain. They were not generally rich people, and they had given the money less out of enthusiasm to see Antony than a desire to remain in Anuse's good books. They had made the sacrifice just to retain their jobs. Now that an opportunity had offered itself for them to get back their hard-earned money without endangering their jobs, they saw no reason why anybody would blame Antony.

More neighbours were flocking in, and before midnight, the house was full. People drank and sand and vomited till the early hours of the following day. But they were never to get back their money. Anuse told those who dared to ask, that he had already paid fares they gave him to the bus owner who, having made his estimates according to the fares, had withdrawn the buses from services that would have fetched him millions! It was of no consequence that the people could still see some of the money stuffed in his pockets.

Chapter Five

A*ntony spent* the few hours left before dawn in Anuse's room. At about 8 o'clock, the following morning he woke up, being roused from his short sleep mainly by the noises of the visitors. He took exquisite care not to meet Anuse alone. So he mixed with the friends who came by, spoke with them for as long as he could avoid Anuse, and answered more and more questions.

"Where is Mama Kata? How is she?" he asked Anuse's third wife. He was referring to his aunt, Anuse's estranged half-sister in whose care he practically grew. Since his mother's untimely death many years ago, Mama Kata remained the closest thing to a mother that he had on earth. As soon as he was told that she was around and well he took permission to try to visit her.

He did not tell Anuse what he intended to do. He simply left the house and it was when he was already about fifty yards away that Anuse saw him and sent a child to call him back. He told Anuse:

"I am anxious to see Mama Kata. I want to know how she is feeling. I want to see..."

"Did they say she was sick?"

"Not so, Pa, I also just want to look around, see the town and things of the sort."

Anuse shook his head disapprovingly and told him:

"When a man reaches this rank, Nkoaleck, he does not go to people. People come to him. He does not see people. People see him. If you want to go round the town, wait. Tomorrow, I shall drive your round in the car. I shall tell the people you will be going out to greet and they will stand in front of their houses or along the streets and you will wave them as your drive along. That is how a man with a title like yours does his things.

Antony's face remained expressionless.

"Let me at least just look around, just as far as up the road. You don't know how much I miss this town."

Anuse saw that he could not hold Antony back. Although he personally did not care about Mama Kata, he knew that a strong bond of love existed between the old woman and Antony.

“Don’t be long then,” he yielded. He was not happy to let Antony loose in the streets. But he accepted principally because Antony’s absence would give him time to prepare the room in which he would be receiving his visitors.

A street with about fifty houses on either side passed in front of Anuse’s house and continued up through the disreputable Fence before joining the main road. It was from the state of the houses he saw as he walked up that Antony realised that he had not been away for too long. There were at least ten houses in the still uncompleted state in which he had left them five years ago. A crumbling house occupied by an old widow who used to throw stones at them while they were still young and troublesome, still leaned on two poles, the windows still stuffed with rags.

Up at the junction into Fence still sat Angrimala, the famous one-legged beggar. It was said that he was a mattress maker, and that he sat at the road side to avoid paying taxes. By his side was his old pal, “Poor man,” He was still singing his old familiar tune” “Na poor i poor, nobi na criss.”

Antony gave a coin to each of them. There were a few mad men around he recognised too. They would make, he thought, a valuable addition to his projected research on the relationship between urbanisation and insanity! He passed through Fence. There were a few old harlots he knew from childhood. They too were still there, plying their trade. In the bars on the dirty verandas, as early as that, people had begun drinking palm wine and beer. They shouted and cursed at the top of their voices.

Through Fence, Antony crossed the main road and continued walking down on the other side towards the Catholic Mission. The school field had not changed: the cross bar of the goal post still leaned towards the ground just as in the good old days. The roads to Mama Kata passed through the Catholic cemetery. It seemed extended, many old graves having been broken down to be replaced

by fresh ones. Antony followed the road between the Fathers' house and the cemetery of broken crosses, crumbling toms, pieces of stolen wreaths (there was the story of a MADE IN ENGLAND coffin that had been dug out of a grave, washed and sold to the family of a certain miserly rich man) and rain-washed epitaphs.

The sight of the cemetery frightened him somehow, but a conspicuous tomb caught his attention. The epitaph in bold lettering read: DEAD BUT NOT FORGIVEN. Somebody had tried very unsuccessful to rub off FORGIVEN and replace it with FORGOTTEN, implying that there was some error. There were also many newly dug graves.

From the cemetery, he could see the first storey-building in all Likume –THIRTY NINE STEPS, once called HOTEL DYNAMIC. The owner of the hotel was a Bami stranger to Likume. Antony remembered how on the day of its opening the man had invited mainly his tribesmen and other businessmen from out of the town. The Likume residents had vowed they would not patronise him. He would, they swore, bring those people from out of the town to drink there. The hotel business virtually collapsed.

The structure still stood there, dwarfing everything else, the most magnificent in Likume, but the most neglected. Even before Antony left, the bar section had fallen completely for want of customers. Various types of businesses had moved in, but each had to pack out because the people were determined to hurt the owner.

There was an obvious tinge of jealousy in it all: the natives of Likume were known to be very lazy. They spent their time drinking *afofa* and palm-wine. They had sold their land to foreigners like Anuse and instead of using the money wisely, they had spend it in the company of harlots. Others had bought posh cars and the like. The new-comers on the other hand, had utilised the land effectively, and gradually as the proceeds from the sale of the lands diminished the natives began to look at the outsiders with displeasure, envy and suspicion. Thus when THIRTY NINE STEPS was opened and the owner made the fatal error of not inviting the natives, they had little trouble recruiting enemies of progress.

Because he had taken a short cut through the cemetery, Antony approached the Roman Catholic Church from the back, The church had moved nearer the cemetery. A passer-by explained the reason

for the move: the road which separated the church from the Moriki residence and which Antony was familiar with, had been created by the Highways Department to resolve a crisis between the Morikis and the Mission. The Morikis were sole owners of the expanse of land on which the Catholic Mission was built. After having sold a specific piece to the Mission, Moriki discovered later that the Mission had added to the land without consulting him.

He had taken the matter to court. The Mission had hired a lawyer who had approached the Highways and they had diverted the main road to pass between the Mission land and the Moriki residence, thereby leaving the disputed land in the hands of the Mission.

Helpless, an irate son of the Morikis had decided to take their revenge by opening a bar in front of their house which operated mostly on Sundays, between the hours of eight and twelve when the church services were on. They had provided huge loudspeakers for their music and they would play the music so high that church services were usually interfered with. It was even said that some young Priests nodded to the rhythm of the music as they gave communion. It was also said that the congregation danced and received communion to the tune of the Makossa or Lingala music that blasted from the bars. The church had no choice but to rebuild a good distance from the road. He did not enjoy the taste of the drink, and as he held it to his lips, his inquisitive eyes fell on a notice on the wall: WELLCOME TO COSTOMERS. He rose with the cup still in his hand and, with a bamboo he scratched the second L from the WELLCOME so that it reads WELCOME.

Na how na, sa?" one of the men inquired.

"Wrong spelling," he said. "It should be double yu ee, one el, c, o, m, ee!" he said.

The man looked at the corrected version for a while and said: "Though I no go school," the man continued with obvious sarcasm "bot, what kind word be WEL?" he was referring to the three first letters created by the missing L. Antony noticed that the man was trying to ridicule him.

"That's why you needed to go to school," he said a bit angrily. Without saying anything about the spelling of COSTOMERS, he rose, returned the cup to its owner with thanks and went round the compound, trying to see in what manner he would try to help his

aunt when he started work. Mama Kata's house stood almost alone. Her coffee farm surrounded the little house, virtually isolating it from the other houses. Bangula where she lived had been a farm area for many years. Only recently had people begun to settle there. Mama Kata was one of the earliest settlers on the farm that her late husband owned. There was an uncovered, roofless pit latrine directly behind the little house. It however had a door which was usually locked by fastening a string. It gave off stinking vapour, the result of rain that had fallen in that part of the town early in the morning. Adjacent to the latrine was a bathroom made out of a few sheets of old zinc. It was equally roofless.

Behind the latrine were plantains, paw-paw plants and large beds of healthy garden eggs, pepper and other vegetable types. At the base of the plantains the old woman had sprinkled wood-ash as a form of manure. To the left of the vegetable beds was a fence in which a pig lay wallowing in black mud. Antony re-emerged from the other end of the house and, bidding the people goodbye, he returned to Anuse's compound to see his aunt.

While he was still in Ghana, Anuse had asked his people to contribute money to lodge Antony in a hotel on his return. When this had been resisted as an unnecessary waste, he had decided to make elaborate plans for his stay in his own house on his return. Antony, he believed, must live in a manner that both reflected and befitted his new status as the first Biongong child to possess a university degree, and from the white man's country at that. If Antony waited and came the day they were expecting him, he would meet the house in order. But he had changed his mind, and so nothing was in place when he arrived.

A very large room which opened into the parlour had been made ready. A large VONO bed with a Dunlop mattress one foot thick was placed at the far corner, facing the door directly. It was overlaid with sparkling white linen that draped and touch the ground. From the middle of the bed down to the lower section, he laid out a very expensive bedspread from China, the colour of gold. A string of pillows lined the edge of the bed that touched the wall.

Behind the door was placed a throne-like rocking chair of well-seasoned mahogany that glittered with polish. It was on this chair that Antony would sit to receive visitors. It was placed in a manner which made him visible in it only when a visitor was already in the room. Under that chair ran a broad multi-coloured carpet, half a metre of it continue to the doorstep. Opposite the throne stood a shelf of books which Anuse had told his people only Antony could read. They were volumes of discarded books, mostly Bibles in Latin, which he had bought at an auction sale when the Kolo Monastery closed down.

Everything had been meticulously worked out and arranged: Antony would sit in the chair in the room during hours he would allocate for receiving visitors. People who were anxious to see him would line up outside and wait very patiently until he was ready to receive them. Then Anuse would personally lead them in one after the other and introduce to him. Antony was not to make as though he had ever known any of the visitors before. He was not to speak in the dialect to anybody because it was already known through Anuse's efforts, that he had stayed out too long to remember it. He was to speak English, and even so, only through the nose as the white men were said to do. Anuse himself was to be the interpreter.

Antony was to be made to understand that the tribe needed that kind of experience, if only to revenge some indignities they had suffered at the hands of other people. For instance, just a year before, a neighbour's son had returned from a nine months' course in Britain. Anuse and a few others had gone to greet him. He had refused to shake hands with anybody, had spoken only through an interpreter, and had made it almost impossible for anybody without a tie on, to sit and chat with him.

The room in which he lived was said to have been set like a shrine. Each time, Anuse went there the boy would ask:

"Whet dirieu sei yueur neim wes agein?"

And this was a lad whom they brought up! Anuse would gnash his teeth. He saw in Antony's return his chance to pay them back in their own coins.

Within the hour and a half which Antony was away, the room was put in the order which best suited Anuse's purpose. But Antony was long in returning. People who had seen him the previous night

had gone and told many others. The news of his return was therefore on everybody's lips that morning. While he was still out, people came in large numbers to see him, brining all sorts of foods – *fufu*, boiled plantains, fried yams, cocoyams, egusi and beans pudding, chicken and the like. Anuse inspected the gifts, rejecting all native foods, and recommending only rice and stew, cabbage, eggs, apples and sardines. Those who felt that they could afford it ran back home to prepare what they were told their son would like to eat. The *fufu* and the *cocoyams* were abandoned to children and other guests.

By the time Antony finally came back many of the people had been to Anuse's residence and returned to their houses several times. In the veranda outside some six children, two of them completely naked, and the rest half-clad and all with running noses, had gathered round two bowls of *fufu* which they were devouring voraciously. He touched each of the kids on the head by way of greeting them and then passed into the parlour to shake hands with everybody.

Anuse was busy behind the house giving instructions to servants about the way Antony's food would be prepared and served. Mama Kata was sitting in a corner in the veranda when Antony came back. He walked up excitedly and embraced her. They exchanged greetings.

"I am just from the house," Antony said. She breathed in and out.

"Mammy, did you prepare *abe-ncbi* for me?" he inquired excitedly.

"Of course, I did," she said.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Your father said we should throw it to the pigs," she complained.

"Perhaps he thinks it is everybody who can buy chicken and rice...!"

Antony looked round and saw some four or five of the half-clad, kwashiorkor-infested children devouring his most cherished meal at the far end of the veranda.

He pulled a stool and went to sit and eat with them.

"Let me see whether when I eat this *abe-ncbi* my belly will be as big as yours," he said, pointing at two of the children with bellies like calabashes hanging from their chests. For over five minutes, Antony sat with them, joyfully eating the *fufu* and cracking jokes in the anglicised vernacular.

There was first a silence, followed by an interchange of glances of disbelief by the tribesmen, and then a sudden applause because Antony did not really hate their food as they had been given to believe! Attracted by the noise, Anuse hurried from the back of the hose to see what had happened. There in front of riff-raffs, his idol sat, eating *fufu*, with his bare hands, conversing in Biongong. And while he yet stood looking at him, Antony rose with a yawn:

“Oh my fathers and mothers, I am glad to be back home again to eat this our God-sent *fufu* and *abe-nchi*. I really missed it.” And in fact, he missed it. Had he met his aunt at home he would have eaten some that early morning because that was what she had prepared and brought for him.

Antony’s behaviour was received with mixed feelings. There were those who looked impressed, some confused, others like Anuse, scandalised. Many did not know how to take it. Was that the same man whom Anuse had spoken of so much, they wondered. Surely, it must be Anuse himself who had condemned the food, they concluded. He was not as far away from them as Anuse had made them presume. He was anxious to speak to them, and in their own language!

Yet, Anuse would not let them speak to him. Now that he had claimed Antony was too big to converse with them, if they ventured to open any conversation with him, would make them suffer. He would find excuses to delay their pay. He would cause them to pay heavy taxes to the Municipal Council. They knew Anuse was capable of anything that would hurt them by telling lies about their income.

Let me see you, Nkoaleck,” Anuse told him as soon as he rose from the apparently disgraceful scene in the veranda. Antony went up to him and the two went into the room that had been prepared for him. There Anuse said: “This is the only place where people will see you...”

“Damn it,” Antony said to himself. He did not allow Anuse to finish talking. “I don’t think I should be treated like a secret,” he said. “Let them see me anywhere they want. If it does not bother them it should not bother me.”

Anuse walked out without saying another word. He never forgave or forgot an injury to his prestige. Thus, later that day, he carefully removed all the expensive material he had put on Antony’s bed.

Thereafter, he did not insist on executing the strategy he had worked out for receiving any visitors. He had thought that it was a favour he was doing to Antony by making him look like a King. But since Antony was not keen on being worshipped, he, Anuse did not see any reason why he should continue to bother himself.

Chapter Six

A*ntony's premature* return from Ghana hurt Anuse severely. His refusal to submit to Anuse's code of conduct angered him, making him less and less anxious to talk to Antony or think of him with the kind of pride he had done previously. But this did not deter him from discharging what he still considered his duties as a father to Antony. Barely three days after Antony's arrival, he called for him and said:

"My son, now that the dew of the journey is still on you, I have thought it wise to let you know the stones on which to step and cross the river of this life. Although you may want to be treated like an ant, let me tell you that our people say an ant crossed a river just by clinging to a floating leaf..." He paused and then said: "You must think of a wife. I want you to get married, from the tribe. If it leaves our pockets it should enter our own pockets again."

"I'll be damned," Antony said to himself. What a way to marry, he thought.

Anuse went on: "And to talk of marrying from the tribe, I want to tell you where the fingers of all who love you are pointing. They are pointing at Bitong. He had a daughter, a girl who has reached a woman. I want you to marry that girl."

"Marry her?" he asked.

Anuse threw his head back and forth three times. Then he said:

"Yes, marry her. And I will tell you why. We of Fuo-Ndee's family owe Bitong a debt which only your marriage to his child can pay. Our people say a dog without a tail cannot know how to thank its master and he will understand. We have been waiting for you to return. You are the tail with which we shall thank him.

Antony tried to talk, but thought it was no use arguing with Anuse. He felt disappointed and even angry. Why was his uncle pushing him around? Why would Anuse run his life for him? Those days were gone! His mind suddenly became filled with bitterness against Anuse. He remembered how Anuse had forced him out of the seminary!

Seventeen years ago he himself had expressed the desire to his father that he wanted to go and live Likume. Nobody knew why except he himself. All his playmates had followed their parents to the Coast. The Chief loved Antony very much and would not willingly part with him, but he allowed Anuse to take him to the Coast.

Antony came with Anuse to the Coast, to Likume. Seven years later, he completed primary school and was sent to college. On his own he had decided he would become a priest, and so applied to enter the seminary in the college. For one year, he was subjected to a life that he felt best suited his disposition – the strict discipline of the seminary. He liked it, and would have spent the rest of his life there. One day, when he came home for holiday, Anuse called him and asked:

“Is it true what my ears are hearing, Nkoaleck? That you are not in college but in the seminary, to become a priest?”

Antony agreed, but explained:

“Father, being in the seminary does not stop me from following up studies in college. It is only the dormitories that are separated. Beside, the seminarians have more time to study than other students because they are forbidden to go out often...”

“Nonsense talk,” Anuse would not be convinced. Then he went on to warn Antony: “You might be the first one to bring poverty into this family. The problems of this tribe are not for priests to solve. They are for a man who knows book. A man whose pockets can talk. Priests are beggars. They are bad luck people. If a man does not die, they can’t get money. You will pack out and go to the dormitory with other boys. We know what is good for you.”

The following day, Anuse followed up his stance by making the 300 kilometre journey to St. Paul’s, Antony’s college. There he spoke with the principal and later with the rector of the seminary. When Antony went back to college at the beginning of the new term his name had been cancelled from the list of seminarians and transferred to the general dormitories. Disappointed, he went up to find out from the principal. The man carefully explained the reasons for the change:

"We had been given to understand, by you, that your family consented to your becoming a priest in future. That was not true. Your guardian was here during the holidays to plead that you be moved back to the general dormitories. You are a prince, the heir-apparent to the throne of your tribe in Small Monje. They expect to make you Chief, as your guardian said, after the present Chief. And your tribesmen believe that the seminary is not the best place to prepare you for that kind of office. They insist that you leave the seminary."

Antony's personal wishes were ignored and he continued his education in St. Paul's with regret. The more so as he did not know or even appreciate the full seriousness of the idea of becoming Chief. In fact, he thought at first that Anuse had just invented the story to have his way over him. It was only years afterwards that he came to sense that he was really being groomed for the mighty office.

That was very many years ago, but it would appear that Anuse still took him for a child he could push around at will. Anuse's decision to force him out of the seminary had taken very much out of his life, making him live like a fish out of water.

"What debt do you owe Bitong?" he asked.

"Many. First, don't tell me that you have forgotten that he was the man who brought your passport to you..."

"I haven't, father."

"And you remember that I told you how he used to help me with money to send to you before the Government gave you a scholarship."

"I said so, Nkoaleck. But that is not all. Other things have happened. This his daughter I am talking about, she is a nurse, a midwife. I told you how your father at home nearly died."

You did."

"If you have come to meet him like this, it is because of that girl. Go to the hospital and ask for medicine, even aspirin. Then you will know what this girl has done for us. No hospital has anything anymore to give to sick people. But let me tell you that I have never lacked an injection in this house. Medicines which unless you are a brother to the doctor you cannot get, she brings to us like sand. If I tell you how much money I have made from selling medicines she brings to me, your mouth will never shut again.

“Go to the hospital at anytime you like. Let this girl just know that you are from this family. Even if you are the number one thousand on the line, even if she was delivering a child in the maternity, this girl will leave all and come to you first. And until she finishes with you, she cannot go back. Then, what is carrying us there? She is from a family that delivers. The males from our blood are strong,” he said holding up a clenched fist.”

What he liked in the girl repulsed Antony’s delicate sensibilities and he seemed to instantly detest both his uncle and what he was talking about. “We are from a family that delivers. So if you take this girl and if you want your chop-chair even today, you will get. That is what I had to tell you.”

“Godamit!” Antony cursed in his heart, gnawing at his lower lip. Marriage was not one of his problems. At least not at that moment. And even if he was thinking of marriage, it was not right for anybody to want him to be married to that particular girl, and for those particular reasons. They ought to leave him alone. He would tell them whenever he was ready to take a serious look at the idea of marriage. His mission was to take a serious look at the idea of marriage. His mission was to change things, for the better.

“I shall consider it, father,” he said with calm decision. Anuse drew out his snuff box, took in some snuff and then asked:

“When?”

That was not the answer he expected from Antony. He had expected an unconditional Yes. He had even expected Antony to thank him for doing so much to ensure that the marriage actually took place. But once again, Antony did not seem to be toeing his line.

“Give me time,” Antony told him, exasperating Anuse all the more. “When I consider I shall tell you.”

Chapter Seven

R*elatives and* friends poured in daily to greet Antony. Anuse spoke to him on Thursday. On Friday, he was visited by three gentlemen – Eru, Nchindia and Beckongncho. They were all from the Biongong tribe. Several years ago they had been either classmates or playmates. But now, they had met as men with very little in common, save the memory of their childhood days.

Eru had a large head, an oval face and small slanting eyes that bore a dreamy or sleepy, almost lovesick look. His hair which reached down very close to his brows were very thick and looked very dark against the light complexion of his face. He had a rather short stunted nose and a small mouth with a very carefully trimmed moustache which stretched the whole distance of the upper lip into the lines that descended from either side of his nose, giving him the permanent expression of a subdued smile.

His chin was forever so clean shaven that were it not for the thickness and richness of the moustache, the brows and the hair on his head, one would think a hair could never grow on it.

Eru worked as an Assistant Price Control Officer. He represented an Insurance company, and also reported for a local newspaper, **Good and Evil**. He had tried his hand at correspondence courses in British Constitution and Economics before abandoning studies. He knew that girls liked young men with well groomed “Afro styled” hair. So he always made sure his hair was in that form. His hair was naturally stunted, but just to keep up with the fashion, he would plait it before going to bed so that when he loosened it the following morning and combed it, it looked long and beautiful.

He knew that girls liked to see young men with hair on their chests, so he wore his shirt with the chest open to expose the few strands of hair that stood there. For the past ten years, he had been looking for a drug that increased hair growth. So far, he had not succeeded. But, even though he had wasted over 50.000 francs on oils that were said to be capable of doing the trick, he still had not given up searching.

He always dressed **à la mode**, and he took care of his body and dress in a manner which only women do. He always smelt perfume, travelled with a pocket mirror and would look into it at the slightest opportunity. He was wearing tight-fitting trousers they called “tanner”, which were the fashion of the day. His **Salamanda** shoes had thick high heels, which was also the latest style.

Finally, he knew that girls liked men who are rich, and so he did anything that lay in his power to give him the amount of money required to keep up the breathless pace of his life. He had consciously chosen to work in the Price Control Office where there were endless possibilities of extorting the most essential thing in life. And living well to him meant amassing as much money as one possibly could from one’s job, moving from one girl friend to the other and wearing the most fashionable and expensive clothes

As far as he was concerned, there was no reason to quarrel with anybody on this earth, so long as there were enough beautiful girls for everybody and enough foolish traders from whom to get bribes with which to lubricate one’s life. He did not envy anybody because there was not much more he wanted in life.

Antony’s assessment of him was that of a young man that ought never to be taken seriously. Eru was about the same age with Antony, had grown up with him in the same neighbourhood, and attended the same schools. Even now, he lived not very Anuse” house. He had left school after only three years in the college and had decided since then to work and earn money. That made more sense to him than the gruelling exercise of spending sleepless nights preparing for exams which one was never sure of passing and which after passing them, there was never the guarantee that one would win the love and admiration of beautiful girls.

Antony recalled an incident in the primary school when Eru was transferred from the Basel Mission to the Catholic Mission in Likume. The Parish Priest, a devoted Roman Catholic wrote on the back of his baptism card:

CONVERTED FROM HERESY:

PROVISIONAL BAPTISM GRANTED.

Eru said later on that the comment made it impossible for him to enter any Catholic College at the time and so retarded his progress.

Antony never thought much of him. He saw Eru and many of the people he met every day in terms of characters in his books. The only reason why they renewed their friendship so soon was because Antony had just returned and needed a companion of his own age group. He needed somebody who could from time to time tell him about changes that had taken place during the five years of his absence. He found Eru to be the ideal person for such a role. He did not seem to Antony to feel any of the frustrations and inadequacy which other young men felt toward him, since he had come with a string of degrees.

There was also Alexander Nchindia, Antony's half brother. Tall, dull-looking with almost weeping eyes and high cheekbones, he wore an almost permanent worried expression on his face. He never spoke with conviction about anything, except Antony's greatness. He lived and worked in Sowa in a Timber Company, about 300 kilometres from Likume. He was three years younger than Antony, perhaps more, and respected Antony to the point of idolatry.

He did not believe that there was anybody else more learned in the whole country than Antony. He spoke of Antony to his friends as "*ndiè-akatè*", which was the equivalent of a library or bookshop. But his respect for Antony was no recent affair. Antony had always helped him. He was the one who helped him obtain a job as a store boy in St. Paul's.

He was a prince of the royal line of Small Monje, but he had been told ever since he was still a child that he would never rule. They said there was a stain in his maternal background. To tell a prince that he would never rule was the greatest insult to be inflicted on such an individual. Yet, while the others used the deprivation to mock him and make his life miserable, Antony always advised him to bear it patiently because it was no fault of his. He was never to forget the saying that "what cannot be helped must be endured" which he thought Antony had coined himself to help him bear his sorrows.

When it became obvious that it was Antony who would be the next Chief, Nchindia rejoiced as if it was he himself who was to rule. It became the greatest passion in his life to see Antony on the

throne of Small Monje. It was his one and only prayer. But Antony had no respect for him. He found Nchindia rather stupid, and as his nature was, he had very little patience with people he rated as dull. It was of little consequence that he knew that some of those he considered dull were actually more intelligent than himself. To him, the fact that Nchindia took an unusually long time to pass his First School Leaving Certificate exam meant that he did not deserve respect. Thus, he always treated Nchindia as though he was an infant incapable of helping himself.

The third gentleman was Kevin Beckongncho. Antony and himself were first cousins. Just a little bit taller than Antony, his hair grew thickly on his head and descended in a neatly trimmed line into a dark nest of hair that first rounded his chin and then rose above the sides of his mouth into his carefully trimmed moustache. Much of his upper lip was masked in the thick moustache, making his mouth which was visible only by the lower lip, look very small indeed. His eye brows were thick, dark and expressive, casting a shadow over his sharp darting eyes.

He was older than any of the other two visitors. Unlike Nchindia, his eyes radiated with wisdom and confidence. He was a teacher in Sowa too. Antony and himself grew apart but they loved and respected each other very much. At the time of the visit to Likume, he was the president of the **Biongong Cultural Association** the principal organ of the tribe which was about to launch a magazine on its cultural activities. Antony being the first graduate of the tribe, Beckongncho felt that it would boost the prestige of the magazine if he got Antony to write a foreword, and perhaps submit an article. He too was very aware of the rumour that Antony was most likely to succeed the dying Chief. He would welcome the idea very much.

He was a fine judge of character and had watched Antony's conduct very closely from childhood. He was convinced that his austerity aside, Antony definitely had certain qualities which could make him a good Chief. He believed that Antony's great learning would bring the throne and the tribe the respect of the educated world. He was much older than Antony, and always spoke like an elder.

Antony and Eru sat almost facing the door while Nchindia and Beckongncho sat with their backs to the door. There was a table between them on which Antony placed his left leg as he leaned

back and listened comfortably. Beckongncho sat with his right hand supporting his chin. Nchindia sat leaning towards the table looking virtually into Antony's face. Eru leaned back in his seat, his hands hanging over the arms of the chair on which he sat.

The four had conversed for about two hours from different standpoints characteristic of friends who have met many years afterwards. Beckongncho had talked about the need for a cultural revival in the tribe, and had expressed his personal gratitude when Antony had promised to write an article on it, in addition to the foreword. Nchindia had talked about Antony's goodness, and how he was still living a comfortable life just because of what Antony did for him before he went to the white man's country. Such a man, he said, was good to be the Prime Minister of the country, because he took other people's troubles if they were his.

Eru had talked about girls whom he described as "creaminals". He said one could no longer tell a pretty girl from an ugly one because of the introduction of bleaching creams. He had talked at length of breast, how the breasts of working class girls were generally flatter than those of girls from the villages or colleges. The flatness, he ascribed to the endless caressing and pinching by the bosses of the girls. He had told Antony:

"If I had those your degrees, my rod will scatter into pieces."

"Why?" Antony asked him. It was not the best topic to talk about but since he had raised the point, Antony felt he should understand his reasons, no matter how silly they were.

"Because of the way I will use it," he said. "With degrees like that, what girl can you ask to dig and she will refuse? Even a reverend sister."

It was at this point that Eru announced:

"Bo, you have strangers."

They all looked outside. Two persons were crossing the yard, a man and a woman. The man was Mr. Bitong, the President of the meeting of the Likume Elements of Small Monje. More importantly, the man was Angela's father. The woman was his wife, and like all good wives she walked a respectable two metres behind the man, carrying his handbag and behaving as though they were not together.

Antony rose and greeting them with very great respect, showing them seats as soon as they knocked and came in. Once again, the topic of the conversation changed. Bitong asked Antony about life abroad, although he refused to believe that it was not much different from what they were experiencing there at home. But his conversation was only geared towards one thing – reminding Antony that whatever he had become, he, Bitong was largely responsible.

Bitong looked as absurd in the smiles he forced on his face every minute as he sounded in Antony's ears. When a man smiles his lips pull apart and stretch towards the jaws and ears, creasing the jaws in the process. Bitong's case was different. There was a scar on his upper lip. Thus when he smiled, you noticed only the lower lip distend. And even then it behaved like a piece of rubber: it would tremble as if it was with the utmost compulsion that it was made to effect the smile. It was as if the upper lip was preventing the lower lip from stretching in mirth. If he did not chuckle you wouldn't know he was being amused.

In the middle of the talk, he broke out beneath his scar-face:

"My son, when we see you go and come with a cap full of feathers on your head like this, one thing comes to our mind that it is good to do good. What is this money we have on earth, if it is not to make us push reasonable and intelligent children like you forward?"

But his wife, Mami Maty, with four fanciful combs that she had used to part her hair on either side, talked on something else when her husband permitted her. She continued to wonder about the nature of the aeroplane.

"My son, tell me. When you people are in the sky like that and you want to excrete, what do you do?"

"You go to the latrine inside the plane, mama," Antony said.

"There is a latrine inside, son?"

"Everything is inside mama. Latrine, kitchen, bathroom."

She did not believe him. She told him: "We heard that when you want to excrete, you go to a hole and excrete there, and it will fall out and come to the ground. They say that is what brings all the bad cough and Apollo and Cam-no-Go."

"That is not true, mama," Antony tried to convince her. They did not directly touch on the question of Antony's marriage which no doubt was the main reason for their coming. But it hovered in

the background. And when they were about to go the old woman asked him:

“My son, why don’t you too give us work to do so that our heart will be glad?”

“Work, mama? I am even looking for work myself,” he said.

“No, I mean our own work. We want your child too to excrete on us. You don’t know how happy we mothers are to touch the excrement of our children’s children.”

“I will give you a lot of work, mama, when the time comes,” Antony said.

When they rose and went as far as the door, the woman said:

“Your friend Angela said I should greet you. My daughter.”

“Okay, mama, greet her too for me,” Antony said.

Angela became the next topic when the woman and her husband had gone away. It was Beckongncho who first brought it up. He asked Antony:

“You understand what she was trying to suggest to you?”

“I do,” Antony nodded.

“May be she wants you to look at her daughter.”

“The whole world is talking about her to me, Kevin. There is not a single relative of ours who has come here and gone away without mentioning her, even in passing.”

“Then you better begin thinking seriously about it,” Beckongncho told him. He spoke rather causally, but it bore the weight of serious advice. “Vox populi...” he said.

“Vox wagon,” Eru answered before Beckongncho had time to complete the saying himself.

Antony smiled to himself and remained silent. Nchindia thought this was an excellent opportunity to try to persuade him.

“Brother,” he began. “If our fathers come together to talk to you, then you should know that there is a reason.”

“Of course they do have reasons,” Antony said. “Only their reasons do not appeal to me at all.”

“You have not really known why, brother,” Nchindia said. Antony turned and looked at him with surprise and disdain.

“The main thing is that our father at home is dying as I wrote to tell you,” Nchindia began again. “And there is no other person whose name stands higher than yours in...”

“As the husband of Angela?” His tone was derisive.

“As the Paramount chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje,” Beckongncho said.

“Hahahah... hahaha,” Antony barked a long scornful laugh.

“Chief of Small Monje?” he asked and laughed again. “It sounds so funny to me you know?”

“Funny?” Beckongncho inquired.

“Funny. It sounds funny in my ears that they see nothing better in me than the making of a Paramount Chief. I think the issues confronting mankind today call for a role that transcends Chieftaincy. Nkoaleck wants to scale mountains, Biongong is presenting him with molehills. My mission is simple: to change this society, not to rule villages,”

“Before you realise it,” Eru said in his usual comic manner, “the society will change you.”

Beckongncho changed the position of his legs, supported his chin with his left hand and leaned forward listening to and looking at Antony with more than his usual respect.

“And why don’t we even look at the matte the way it has been presented?” Antony went on. “I have just come, and have not even got a place of my own to live in. I have not yet got a job. Then they thing the more important thing is marriage. And even if it were important, people don’t know each other in a vacuum. They talk about a girl I don’t even know.”

“I will introduce her to you,” Eru volunteered.

“That will still not be enough,” Antony told him. “I have heard about her from them already, and what they say does not impress me at all.”

“Like what?” Beckongncho inquired

Antony looked reluctant to explain.

“No, Antony, tell us.”

“Like secreting drugs from hospitals to give my people and the like...”

“And that is what you call a bad thing? Is it your hospital?” Eru asked. “Is that not what everybody is doing everywhere? Every doctor now has a private clinic and a private pharmacy at home. They call it *fridge benefits*. When you come to see them in the hospital, they complicate matters for you. They tell you how this is a

government hospital and therefore is not sufficiently furnished to give you the best results for your problem. They charge a prohibitive fee and when you protest, they say they will do you the favour of lowering fee if you came for consultation in their homes....”

“But I completely disapprove of it,” Antony remonstrated. “I can’t fancy myself being so mean as to appreciate or encourage her,”

“Then you change your planet,” Eru told him. “Don’t you hear that the Americans have started going to the moon? When next they are going there, apply to them. Tell them to take you away from here because you completely disapprove of the way things are being done on this planet. A goat feeds only where it is tied, whether you like it or not.”

“I’d like to see some of those goats die where they are tied,” Antony said with an air of total condemnation.

Chapter Eight

N*ine days* after Antony's arrival, Anuse came up to him and told him that a party was being arranged to welcome him back. He called it "a Function."

"Father," he began, "I don't think that sort of thing is necessary..."

"It is necessary," Anuse told him forcefully, even before the last syllable left his lips. He had seen that unless he treated Antony with severity, he would never do what he wanted to have done. Antony had spend the last two nights sleeping at his aunt's place. This Anuse had found highly insulting to Antony's position as the most learned man in the tribe. The house was dirty and old, and whenever it rained, it was impossible to stay in because the thatches leaked like a sieve. Antony had not given any precise explanation for taking the risk, but Anuse believed it was the result of an inability to take a serious look at his position in life. He tried to explain the importance of the party:

"... We do not eat people. When you have come back like this, the only way for us to show the world that we are people too, and that we are very glad, is to call the tribe together and thank the gods of our fathers that they took you there and brought you back without trouble. That party is necessary. You hear m?"

Antony shrugged, threw his hands open resignedly and said:

"Well, as you say, father. But look at the expenses to be incurred..."

"That is not your palaver, Nkoaleck. We are not going to borrow from anybody. I am ready to sell even this house for that party. The world must be shown what I am." "But father..."

There is no **but**, Nkoaleck. A snuff-box does not sneeze. It is his owner who sneezes."

Bullshit, Antony thought. He remained silent for a very long time and then said very imploringly:

“Father, listen. This money could have been used for many other profitable things for this tribe. Everybody keeps complaining of poverty. It could pay the fees of a helpless child in a college for even...”

Nkoaleck,” the man shouted furiously, “if you were still a small child, I would have said, “shorrupt your moufth! If you want me to talk to you like a child I will do so. Age is as age does. The mistakes you have made already are too many. We are waiting for you tomorrow, you come today. I prepare a room for you in a house, you choose to live in a latrine. What is all this? Does book add sense to a child’s head or it removes it? How then are you different from those who never went anywhere, if you will not be treated differently?

“Everybody already knows that next week as I said, all Biongong will gather in the house here to receive you. If you don’t think it is necessary, we tell you it is. If it does not please you, it pleases us. If you are already thinking of walking on your head, you should first of all know that you did not deliver yourself. Please, don” let another person hear this king of thing that you are saying about the party.”

Antony spent the night in Anuse’s house, in his own room. His luggage was still there. He had not just being stupid and ungrateful. His mother had long died, and his aunt who lived now in Likume had often taken very good care of him long before he left for further studies. On his return, he found that Anuse had completely neglected her, perhaps because he saw that she had nothing to offer to increase his wealth. Antony did not want to make her feel more miserable by choosing to live only in Anuse’s house. He did not want her to think that he too had forgotten of her simply because he had become a very educated man. This was the point he tried to explain to Anuse for going to live with her. But Anuse would not listen, nor would he bring himself to see any sense in Antony’s objection to the welcome party.

The following day, Angela herself came to see Antony. She brought food for him. As far as the custom went, this was a very important preliminary to any discussion about marriage. It turned

out that she was not a total stranger to Antony. He had known her casually several years ago when she was still in the lower classes of the primary school.

He studied her very quickly. Angela had long hair that was treated into curls and then laced at the edges such that one would have thought she was wearing a large beret. To the front, the lowest folds of curls reached down to her permanently raised brows, making her forehead practically invisible.

Her eyes, below rather long eye-lashes, were clear and sharp with an almost childlike brightness in them. They were set at an unusually wide distance from the line of the spine of the nose. Her nose was small, with equally small nostrils. Her mouth too was small, but with the typical Bantu thickness framing her lips. On the whole, her face, round or rather oval in shape, and unadorned by make-up of any sort, looked beautiful.

She had a short, masculine neck round which she was wearing a glittering chain, made probably from an alloy of gold. Her shoulders were a bit broad, and she wore a blouse that was cut in front to just above her breasts, emphasising their roundness.

A smile flashed across her face fairly regularly, giving the impression that she was generally cheerful. But she behaved as though she was unsure as to how Antony, with his severe look would respond to her smile. She noticed that he smiled when their eyes met. But whereas she continued to smile even when she was looking away, Antony would switch off the smile almost immediately.

Her whole visage emitted politeness in a rather innocent manner. She wore a skirt that reached just above the knees. She was wearing a pair of leather sandals that ended in straps mid-way up the calves. She had long red-coloured toe nails. Antony, quite tall himself, was not taller than her by much. She spoke softly and with an undertone of naïve tentativeness. She was dark in complexion and with her height and well-formed body that made her very attractive.

But Antony saw her differently from his tainted vision. He saw her as an impostor, someone set up by her parents and his to make it impossible for him to get the girl he would honestly have married. This belief blinded him to everything else that she said or did. If she was that good, he thought, why would they want to force her down his throat? He thought it was too early for him to commit himself.

Antony thought he knew the idea behind the visit and the food. He studied her for a very long time and persuaded himself that she did not possess enough physical qualities to justify all the trouble his people were going into. He decided to let her know how he was feeling toward her.

"I do not expect this kind of action from a girl like you who had had an opportunity to learn some book," he felt like telling her. He opened the basket, looked at the contents and then shook his head in something of a disappointment.

"What, anything wrong?" she asked and then added. "It was my mother who packed the food really." She thought something in the way the plates were packed in the basket annoyed Antony.

"There parents of a girl make a suggestion to the parents of a boy," he muttered inaudibly to himself. "The boy's parents talk to him about it. Then without even meeting the girl to say what he feels about it, the next thing you receive is a basket of food. I think this is ridiculous," he said aloud.

Angela sat still and frozen with shame that instantly clouded her livid face. There was a simmering anger in her breast that was directed not at Antony but at her parents and Anuse. Since Antony's departure for the university, her parents had often talked to her about him. They would visit his parents and then return with greetings from Antony, which they would say he had included in a letter to his uncle. Whenever Anuse himself met her he never failed to mention Antony's name. He would tell her how Antony wanted to write to her but did not know her address. When she gave Anuse her address and later met him, he told her how Antony said he had intended to write but was too busy with his studies.

Perhaps if Anuse had been honest with himself and had written to Antony about her he would have known much earlier that Antony was not very keen on marriage. But he believed that he had the final say in any decision in Antony's life. And from this premise, he

believed that whatever he thought was good for Antony would be automatically accepted. He kept the parents of Angela completely in the dark of the real facts, and continued to tell them how eager Antony was to marry their daughter.

Anuse soon began to believe his own lies. Angela herself gradually became interested in Antony on the basis of the messages conveyed to her frequently. She therefore decided to show how willing she would be to marry Antony by helping his people exploit the only means that was available to her – the hospital. She had expected that Antony would come to see her and her parents upon his arrival. But he had not, and this had made her a little unsure of his alleged intentions. She had decided she would not take the initiative to go there. Her mother had visited Antony and returned with the information that Antony was very anxious to see her, but was too preoccupied with visitors to come. They had therefore suggested that she should come and see him, and that he should not go empty handed. Now she was being disgraced! At twenty-four, she felt that she was old enough to be able to face embarrassment intelligently. She shook off the nervousness and humiliation that were threatening to engulf her and said:

“Tony, I have not brought this food to you because of anything. I have just come to see you as somebody I had known before.”

Antony’s severe face relaxed a little and she saw his lips particularly hidden by a full black moustache, curve upward in a faint smile. “I may be overreacting,” he said, “because since my arrival here, I have received countless delegations from your people.”

“From my people?” she seemed to be surprised. Not that she was unaware of any such thing. She felt that it would help her prestige better to pretend. And it really did work because when Antony next spoke, a sudden overture of friendliness had crept into his voice. “People have come here,” he said. “And I have been told of your activities, and I feel that it is up to me to take any decision. I don’t see any reason for any haste. There are weeks, months, years ahead of us still. There is enough time for you to study me and for me to study you, if what we know already about each other is not enough to push forth a suggestion.”

Her expression changed suddenly from the gloom of the initial embarrassment and she brightened up with a faint smile at the corner of her mouth. Antony went on:

“My uncle especially has been very happy with your attitude toward them. Not to mention what your father did to me personally.”

Here Angela sat up to a more erect position, smiled even more broadly and then said:

Hmmm, I do try to help them all. You know that this our work in the hospital is a matter of man-know-man. You think if you had done medicine and opened a pharmacy or a clinic today, you will buy medicines with me still working in the hospital? No way!”

Hurt by her pride in her vicious achievements, he ended the conversation or rather early. I had an appointment with somebody downtown. I will send a child to bring the basket later.”

Antony’s reaction stunned her. She went away, leaving him to ponder for a long time how he would manage to get rid of such a woman from his life.

Chapter Nine

Antony went to visit Eru soon after he parted from Angela, a visit which altered his opinion of Eru, at least for a while. Eru was at home. He occupied a self-contained apartment made up of a large parlour and a large bedroom. When Antony entered and sat down, he was amazed by the orderliness. He had not expected to find anything impressive.

The parlour was very large and built in the form of the letter L. It looked very neat, so neat, in fact, that had he not been the one to persuade Eru to take him to his place he would have concluded that Eru had cleaned the house and arranged things in that order simply to impress him. He wondered for a fraction of a second whether his eyes were deceiving him or that his judgement of Eru was wrong.

Eru's library was his first fascination. Although his own books were still being awaited by sea, Antony took a singular interest in books. In his peculiarly intellectual mind, a man's library was a reflection of his seriousness towards education which he considered synonymous with life. He went straight to the book shelf. He had never thought of Eru in the context of serious academics. He was therefore even surprised to find a library, however scanty! He looked only at the books whose authors names were written on the exposed spines. There was *Great Lives*, some 20 or more copies of *True Detective* magazines, an equal number of *Master Detectives*, about 30 volumes of *Readers' Digest*, a volume of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

There was also: How to Make Friends and Influence People, The Pan Book of Wine Making, How to Judge a Picture, Inquire Within, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Know Yourself through Your Handwriting: A Guide to Understanding Graphology, The Cosmology of John Milton.

On the cupboard was a pile of magazines. When he picked up the top-most copy, he was not surprised to find that it was a sex magazine: *PICTORIAL: EROTIC BLACK WOMEN*. That was the

kind of thing he had expected to find. He did not look at the rest of the magazines, but he was sure they were all of the same kind. That was what he had expected to see in Eru's house!

No, he persuaded himself, Eru was incapable of any profound reflection. All that glitters is not gold. He was not going to take Eru more seriously than he actually deserve, just because he had polished his floor and bought a few colourful chairs. He thought Eru too carefree, and if as it is often said, the nature of a man's surroundings can give a vital clue to his true character, then in his estimation, one could very easily get away with the impression that Eru was the kind of person who took life seriously.

The floor of the spacious parlour was coated with a carefully maintained Persian rug which occupied about three square metres of the main sitting area. There were two sitting sections. There was one to the left, more or less behind the door as you entered. It was made up chiefly of cane chairs and a central table also of cane, and four cane side-stools. On each of the chairs was a thin cushion to make sitting comfortable. All the chairs, the side stools and table were very well varnished. The dining table was behind the cane section, a little to the wall.

To the right of the parlour was the more serious section. It contained four-chairs, a central table with a rotating top. A square had been carved out of the central area and a piece of glass fitted into the space exactly. Beneath the glass Eru had stuck the picture of his late parents and then himself surrounded by those of several beautiful girls. Antony would discover that not only did the pictures of the girls beneath the glass changed every time he visited Eru, but also the sitting arrangement in the house! What seemed out of place in the shelf was the presence of the Bible, in French and English. It lay just near the sex magazines.

There were three large windows, each adorned with silk-like drapes that reached down well below the window sills. The chairs were made of solid massive well-varnished mahogany. The cushions on each were made of brown velvet that almost matched the colour of the wood of the chairs. The floor itself was bright red, either Eru had painted it red himself or it was made of red cement which he constantly polished.

“You have quite a nice apartment here,” Antony said with a slight touch of envy.

Eru smiled at the understatement and told him, “This is my own doctorate. A man’s home is his castle.” He then invited Antony on a tour round the house.

A corridor led from the parlour, passed in front of his bedroom to the toilet at the extreme end. The kitchen was on the right, almost directly opposite the door into his bedroom. A red corridor led from the parlour to the toilet. He showed Antony his bedroom: a large bed stood in the centre with drawers on either side. It contained a thick foam mattress overlaid with an intricately decorated bedspread.

The floor too was polished so well that one could easily slip and fall. To the lower end of the room stood a large wardrobe with the zip drawn half-way to expose its contents of suits, well-ironed shirts and *jumpas*. To the other end stood a shoe rack on which he lined some seven pairs of shoes, all well polished. Besides the bed, near the upper section stood a portable radio. There was also a record player connected to two small speakers each overturned on two large clay pots that acted as amplifiers, and from which music groaned. Antony nodded and walked out.

This is the kitchen,” Eru said, opening the little door to the right of the corridor. Antony just threw a careless glance inside. Out of curiosity he decided to see the toilet. The toilet bowl was covered along the outer edge with some woollen material. On a line that ran from over the door to the window on the other side there were about seven white pants and two white towels. The window sill looked like a hairdresser’s table: air fresheners, perfumes, powders, rubbing oils, shaving creams and an electric shaver. To the right of the window was a very large mirror that could show your figure down to the knees. To the right of the window was a wash hand basin and clothing steeped in bleach that gave off a smell that was suppressed only by the air-fresheners.

Antony could not help wondering whether he would ever have an apartment so well furnished. Anyway, he consoled himself, a sound education is better than any number of mansions. He had caught a sideways glance of some pieces of papers sticking on the back of the toilet door. Soon after they returned to the sitting room, he returned to the bathroom. He shut and locked the door and read all of it.

One of the most repulsive was the photocopy of a drawing captioned *WHICH IS YOURS?* The piece of paper bore twenty different women with exposed upper bodies showing twenty different types of shapes of breasts. The first one was labelled *CRANBERRIES*, the second *ORANGES*, the third *PEACHES*, the fourth *LEMONS*, the fifth, *GRAPE FRUITS*.

Antony noticed that the artist had taken his time to make the shape of the breast as close as possible to the shape of the fruit whose name it bore. A large and rather longish pair was labelled *PAW-PAW*. Some names, however, did not have anything to do with fruits. One drawing of extraordinarily large breast was labelled *FEDERAL MIGHT*, while one with tiny breast with nipples looking upwards was labelled *I SWEAR TO GOD*. The last drawing was labelled *SLIPPERS!*

There was a cartoon cutting from a sex magazine which Antony considered very ingenious. A man in an overcoat stood at the edge of a wall reading a notice on a door in a brothel. The man was wearing a camera with an extended lens which hung just about his waist. A corridor led from the edge of the wall to his left.

A light hung over his head, slightly to the right, such that his silhouette fell to his left, making the protruding lens from his waist look like an enormous erect male organ. A woman approaching from the corridor could be seen trembling with obvious fright at the size of the protruding lens.

What caused him to leave the toilet was a notice below the drawings. It was placed so low that you were forced to read it when you sat down on the toilet bowl which was behind the door. It read:

AIM HIGH, SHIT LOW
HELP US TO KEEP THIS SHIT HOUSE SO KLEEN:
IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR SHIT WILL NOT GO, DO THE
FOLLOWING;

- I. LOOK TO YOUR RIGHT, AND YOU WILL SEE A LONG TOILET BRUSH.

Antony looked to his right and saw the brush.

2. PICK IT UP BEFORE YOU FLUSH AND BRUSH THE NONSENSE AS YOU FLUSH. DO NOT BE ASHAMED BECAUSE AS YOU CAN SEE, NOBODY IS SEEING YOU.

OR DID YOU FORGET TO LOCK THE DOOR?

Antony felt the door, smiled and flushed the toilet as if he had actually gone to stool.

Eru knew that Antony did not drink any alcohol, but he dragged out a tray of drinks. In the middle of the tray was what Antony described as an outrageous sculpture: it was a black carving of a naked man clasping a pipe between his legs which looked like an erect male organ, in a motion of urinating. The little man was standing on a rectangular box of the same colour. The whole carving was about half a metre high.

What is this one too?" Antony asked.

"Piss corps," Eru answered.

"What does he do?

Eru took a glass and holding under the pipe pressed the head down word saying:

"Piss me something here." Eru caused half a glass of Whisky to be **pissed** from the pipe, which he drained and then asked Antony: "You try some, nnohh?"

Antony simply shook his head in denial, but without opening his mouth.

"What problem do you have with alcohol?" Eru asked him.

"It's all escapism," he said. "Alcoholism, drug addiction and lasciviousness, those are all forms of temporary escape. They solve nothing. Grapple with the problem, look for a means to solve it, don't run away into a fantasy world by resorting to things of the sort."

Eru Pissed himself another shot, drained it and, placing the glass down said almost to himself: "Better for me to escape from a snake than grapple with it. You will soon tell me that Jesus Christ was a

drone, because he changed water into wine... Why did he not change a stick into a girl? Why had he to change only water into wine? Why was that the first miracle?

“Why do you think it was the first miracle?”

“It was the first miracle because he wanted mankind to know that the truth lies in the cup.”

“When you drink like that,” Antony began, “you find yourself doing the most outrageous things...”

“Like what? I hope you are not thinking of sex?”

“Thy own lips have said it.”

Eru laughed loudly and then told him: “Don’t be a dog in a Kenja. Don’t be a waste paper basket. It is on the day of the Last Judgment that we shall know who is who.”

Antony shook his head and said: “You will really need a lawyer, Eru, on that day.” “Instead it will be you to hire a magistrate. See, The Last Judgment is done part by part. The judge your toe, judge knee, judge your waist, judge your everything. When you die now and go and on the last day, God asks: ‘Mr. Antony Nkoaleck, what were you doing with your rod while on earth?’ what will you say?”

“Antony will say he was urinating,” Antony told him without emotion.

“Yes, continue to urinate,” Eru said, laughing at him. ‘Don’t dig. Urinate, because God said he wanted more urine than people on earth. On that day, I shall be there when God will pass the sentence: ‘Lucifer, take this Antony Nkoaleck and the other urinators and put them into the unquenchable fire. For I gave them to dig and multiply, but they decided to only urinate.’”

Antony changed the topic to something more serious. “Bo, that girl visited me this afternoon,” he said very casually. “Which girl?” Angela.

“God bless you. How many times did you dig her?” Antony twisted his lips contemptuously and said:

“Eru, you are abominable.” “Because I have asked you?” “But she is repulsive. If ever I am thinking of a girl to marry, it should not be such...”

“Then dig and pass. That is the kind we call kick-and-pass.”

“That sounds silly to me,” he told Eru.

Chapter Ten

Two nights after Angela brought the food, Antony was sitting up, working on his writings when he heard a knock on his door. For a while, he thought it was Eru. He answered the knock, rose to the door and turned the knob. It was Angela. She was dressed in her nursing uniform. The faint smile that had begun to take shape on his lips disappeared instantly.

"I'd be damned!" he said to himself, his forehead wrinkled in a mixture of surprise and mounting embarrassment. He pulled at his beard and remained standing in the door way. The look in his eyes was not one of welcome, but one of astonishment and even indignation. Only the courteous side of his being prevented him from shutting the door in her face.

In her judgement, Antony's behaviour the last time she was there, was characteristic of all men. When she left that day, she thought that he was actually interested in her but was either ashamed to show it or still needed more time with her to make up his mind. She therefore decided to visit him as often as he could in order to hasten a decision from him.

"Wow, Angela, no work tonight?" He was still standing in the doorway. There was a brief silence. He peered into the dark night, let her in and then shut the door gently. When he repeated the question, she made a gesture with her left hand which implied that the question was not important. Then smiling she said:

"Government work no di finish. I will go there whenever I want."

"You mean you are supposed to be on duty?"

"Yes na. Don't you see my uniform? I am just from the maternity. I was just sitting there when I suddenly thought of you, Tony,"

Antony did not return the smile. Instead, he went on to what if a woman wants to deliver now?"

"Let her deliver na. When they were enjoying night and day, up and down did they not know that one day they will pay? Let them deliver na. There are other nurses."

Her callous indifference to the possible fate of a helpless patient cut through Antony's flesh like a blade.

"The other nurses are not enough Angela," he thought of telling her, but something held him back. He sat down and looked from her to the slightly opened window, turning the matter over in his mind. If the nurses were enough, this lady would not have been asked to be present this night. The patients need her services. And this minute that she was not with them, anything could happen because one nurse is absent. Angela would not be near enough to give a suffering woman the help she most needed.

His face contorted with irritation and he rose and leaning forward towards her, said very calmly.

"When people talk of killing, Angela, it does not just mean the act of taking a cutlass and knocking off somebody's head. It is a thing of this nature that you are doing. You kill a human being when you are placed in a position to save his or her life, and you make a joke of that responsibility, and the individual dies."

"Anyway," she shrugged with a belated feeling of guilt and as if she had read his thoughts all along, she excused herself:

"I was only coming to know the date and time for your welcome party because I will be on nigh the whole of next week."

Enough is enough, Antony thought. He did not care to know why she had come. They had not yet committed themselves whether he had been thinking about her or not, and whether it had been discussed in other circles or not.

"Let me be honest with you, he resumed. "I feel so uncomfortable about this bullshit marriage issue that I think we should forget about it. I am sorry, good night.

Angela tried to say something.

"I am sorry, good night," he said raising his voice and opening the door for her to go out. "I am not going to mention anything to anybody about this stand that I have taken in our relationship. If you like to do so, that is entirely your own business. Please, good night."

He returned and went to lie down on his bed. There he waited until he heard the door open and close.

The following day, he moved most of his things to his aunt's house. He purchased a small table and a chair on which to do his writings and cleaned up one of the rooms. He also bought a

transparent sheet of zinc which he fitted on the thatched roof to provide more light to the room. There he set up a small office. When he told Ma Maria his uncle and friends were forcing him to marry a girl he did not like she sided with him. She said:

“Perhaps Anuse still thinks that these days are like those our own when they would catch a girl you have never seen, tie her hands and open her legs for you to sleep and thereafter, she became your wife. When you are ready to marry, you will marry.” This endeared him all the more to the woman.

Chapter Eleven

Anuse's arrangement went on as planned for the party to welcome Antony. It took place in his compound three days after Antony had told Angela off. She had decided she would not mention the disgrace to any of her parents, unless it really became necessary. On his part, Antony mentioned it only to Eru.

Eru did not think it was anything serious at all. His only complaint was that it was stupid for Antony to have abandoned her without going to bed with her.

Anuse was too preoccupied with preparations for the party to find out how Antony was getting on with Angela. Besides, he was not very anxious to know more than he had already seen. He was at home when Angela visited Antony with the food. He was also informed that Angela had been seen in Antony's room very late one night. He therefore had no doubt that the plans were materializing.

The attendance at the party was heavy and it included friends and relatives from out of Likume. There was a small delegation of the Biongong Cultural Association led by its National President, Kevin Beckongncho. He was a very critical and sensitive man and would note every action of Antony's very carefully. However, as his nature was, he kept a very low profile. He sat throughout the evening seeing everything but not saying much.

All of Anuse's workers were present, so were his neighbours. In principle, the occasion had been arranged by the Biongong Elements in Likume. Customarily, if an important member of the tribe was to go on a journey, they came together to send him off. On his return, or on the arrival of some new member of importance, they came together to welcome him in a place decided by the entertainment committee.

When Antony returned, it automatically meant that a reception would have to be arranged to welcome him back. It was suggested that it should take place in the town hall. Anuse had objected and had insisted that it should take place in his compound. The committee had yielded to his pressure and a sum of 100,000 francs had been agreed upon as most appropriate for the event.

Anuse took time to organize the sitting order: neighbours and passers-by were to sit on benches or stand immediately you crossed the gutter into the compound. The space immediately in front of the neighbours – covering about 10 square metres, was to be left for dancing. Antony, the guest of honour, the executive of the Meeting of the Biongong Elements of Likume and other VIP's were to sit on the veranda, facing the road. The space to the right of the VIP's was to be occupied by the less important members of the meeting. To the left of the VIP's, a little distance into the dancing space were to be erected two tables, one for drinks and the other for food.

In the evening of the party, it was noticed that the food and drinks had been placed in two distinct portions, one smaller than the other. The first segment, the much smaller one bore the label **MEETING CARGO**. The second and larger one bore Anuse's name. He wanted the public to see that he alone had contributed twice what the entire meeting had offered.

Bitong, the president of the group had indicated that he did not like the separation of the food and drinks. But Anuse wanted to keep them that way. Beside, Anuse was his vice-president, and old friend, and would soon be his father-in-law.

The party started off very badly, even after nobody decided to take a serious look at the partitioning of the food and drinks. Normally, it was the secretary who was supposed to read the welcome address. But Anuse insisted that he must be the one to talk first. He wanted his voice to be the first to be heard over the loud speakers.

As soon as he was introduced as the chairman for the occasion, he rose to the centre of the gathering, took the microphone in his right hand and greeted friends, brothers and relatives. He stated the

purpose of the gathering, to welcome back home his son who had travelled “far and white,” and who had taken the name of Biongong to all the four corners of the earth.

There was a slight applause and then silence. He began to ring our *HIS* son’s achievements, from his First School Leaving Certificate examination down to the last medical examination he had just taken to apply for employment. He was only interrupted by an outburst of cheers initiated by Eru who sat next to Antony.

Encouraged by the cheers, Anuse went on to exasperate his guests. Since he was not even reading a prepared speech, it did not take him long to say things which pleased only him alone. He said his son had been to the white man’s country, that his son had brought *the certificate* which nobody has ever got in the whole country, that his son had come to set an example to people who have been lazy to take care of their children. He said his son was there that evening to let people who have millions of children know that instead of have some kind of children, a man should have *ONE* child.

The people felt not only infuriated but also insulted. The Biongong had a saying the when a child emerges from its mother’s womb, it is the child of the world and no longer that of the parents alone; his glory was that of the family, and also his shame. They had come to welcome *their* child, not *Anuse’s* child. Only one thing prevented an open protest right there. Most of those who were present lived at his mercy. They were either his workers from whom he had exacted an oath of unconditional obedience, or his tribesmen whose taxes were assessed by him. Noticing the cold indifference with which they were looking up at him, Anuse proceeded in the vernacular:

“Biongong has now got a college at home. And I will want Nkoaleck to go there and be Principal. Even if it is money, we shall use, we shall buy that post for him so that before we open our eyes like this, for every five children in that college, four must be our own.”

There was an applause, now that he was speaking in the interest of the group. He went on:

“For every three children, two must be our own” Applause.

“And if to say there is only one child, that one should be...” The people shouted in response! “Our own.”

“We are all anxious to gather here again for something,” he resumed. “And that something is Nkoaleck’s marriage, which I think will not be very long from now.”

It was Bitong who led the applause, as the prospective father-in-law. Anuse then went on to thank the people for coming, and then wishing them a very good appetite, he sat down.

Everybody, however, looked pleased with the latter part of his address, in spite of the initial blunder. When they had clapped and cheered and laughed enough, it was Antony’s turn to speak. He stood slightly less than to metres tall. He was not wearing a coat and tie as most people expected to see. He was wearing his usual Mahatma Ghandi spectacles, a blue jeans jacket and the trousers to match. The chest of the jacket was open, revealing a well-ironed yellow nylon shirt with a collar that fell over the neck of the jacket.

His rather overgrown hair was well-combed and parted slightly on the left side just above the ear. His forehead shone brightly in the evening lamps as though he had deliberately oiled it to make an impression on the guests. He had taken time to trim his beard and moustache that evening so that he looked very neat.

He did not go to the centre of the floor to use the microphone as people had expected, but stood just near his seat. Even before he went abroad, he had never been among the best speakers of the Biongong dialect. Having been away for some five years, nobody expected him to address them in Biongong. But, for some unknown reason, Antony decided he would do so.

“My fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and friends,” he began in good English and then switched to a language which he alone thought was their vernacular:

“Nkachumok extremely appreciative nendung effort community ga gono nintu receive meh. Because igani extremely rare nindeh mobilize an entire community or let us say tribe, nintu receive a single individual.”

That was his first mistake for the evening and the people did not hide their feelings. He had meant to prove to his people that he had not forgotten his vernacular. But his tribesmen had a hard time following the anglicised speech.

Antony had sense himself that the people were not impressed. Eru whispered something to him. Antony lowered his ear into Eru’s mouth.

“Leave contretalk, bo, talk your bookshop.”

He proceeded in English: “As I was saying in our vernacular, in fact, everything has been so well arranged that I don’t know to whom I owe the greatest thanks...”

Anuse led the clapping and everybody else joined. When there was silence again, Antony dampened their excitement with his second mistake. Again, he did not lose any personal honour or prestige or love by being called a white man. But, again he chose to make a defence which hurt the sensibilities of many that gathered there. He told them:

It is such a pity that I am not used to making speeches. But I would just seize this opportunity to make a few observations, one or two mistakes which I have notice to my greatest disappointment every since I got back here. I am talking about certain things which have made it hard for your to share properly and profitably in the benefits of the education I have acquired abroad.

“The first point is this business of the white man’s country.”

There was a hush. Somebody drew attention to the fact that Anuse had asked the cameraman to take pictures of the drinks, especially the strong drinks and the champagne and that immediately after the picture, he had sent the drinks back to his office unopened.

“I am not a white man, for all I know. I do not speak through the nose and do not even feel the need to do such a ridiculous thing. I am surprised to hear people who have even conversed with me in the vernacular say afterwards that I can only speak grammar.” Here he turned in Biongong and asked: How can a monkey forget to eat bananas? To forget my mother tongue is to forget my culture, and I know very well that culture is enshrined in the lives of a people.”

“That culture is what?” somebody asked from far outside.

“That our culture is swine,” some other person said.

“He did not say swine,” Eru shouted,” He said enshrine.

“Enshrined,” he repeated, “you isnorant,” he cursed jokingly.

Bitong lowered his mouth into Anuse’s ears and asked him in the vernacular whether there was any difference between swine and enshrine.

“The same thing,” the man replied. The was the first interruption and by no means the last that Antony would receive that evening.

It would appear that Antony had anticipated a cheer. But none came. Beckongncho and a good number of others were surprised that he was unaware of how his words were likely to offend the pride of his people. Only silence reigned. A silence so ominous that it compelled him to look round into the faces of his listeners.

There, stamped, was an expression of amazement, shame, and even affront. He tried to explain further. Perhaps he had been completely misunderstood, he thought. While in Legon, he had suffered at the hands of native Ghanaians and would not like to think of them as white men or of Ghana as a white man's country. At any rate, whatever happened to him in Ghana was his private business. He went on to explain:

"I am from Cape Coast and Legon in Ghana. Ghana is a blackman's country. It is in Africa. The people there are even blacker than you and I."

That did not seem to make any difference. The distressing silence reigned on. Like a man possessed by the evil spirit he proceeded:

"I have even heard people say that this our country is too backward for a man of my qualification to work in. That I only came to take a wife and go back. This is giving you a very wrong impression of me and of education itself. I have come to stay. The country allowed me to go for further studies because it knew that it would need my services after the course.

"Then there is this question of electricity. Others say it was because I was coming back that my uncle hurried up and put electricity in the house. They say it was electricity which used to wash me, rub me with oil and comb my hair. How on earth such information ever got into circulation, I cannot tell. It is obviously false. I would like such people to find out where I am staying now."

"Where are you staying now?" an enraged relative shouted from the crowd.

Antony did not take offence at the question. Perhaps he did not understand why it was asked. He said:

"I am staying in my aunt's house. A mat house. And I use a bush-lamp, just like any other person. In Ghana, I was using a wooden comb, something we had long stopped using in this country which you think is backward. Please, I hope I have made myself quite clear. You make me feel so guilty and ashamed to think that I have

ceased to be one of you. That I have suddenly become a God, just because I have gone to a university outside the country. I am still the same Antony Nkoaleck you once knew, and with whom you were once so used to conversing. Let us avoid these mistakes.”

There was a very long pause and a silence so profound that for the first time, he recognised that he was wearing a watch on his wrist. His hands were hanging far down by his side, but he could hear the watch ticking. He did not expect an applause. But he felt that there ought to be some kind of reaction from the people to indicate some approval, to show that they had understood him. Most of the people were not even looking at him. He shrugged and as though caught in a current over which he had no control, he went on to point out a second error:

“And for what my uncle has just said about the new college at home, I would also like to make one thing clear. I would be more than happy to go there and work as Principal. But choosing me and sending me there is something which does not lie in the power of the tribe. I have already submitted my dossiers to the Ministry of Education for employment. They will be the ones to decide where I will work at home. So if things turn out differently, nobody should ask my uncle why he ever made such a promise. If I am sent elsewhere, no problem. You should still feel proud that you trained a son who is also training the children of other people. Thank you very much for listening.”

As if by a premeditated plan, not a man stirred a muscle. Perhaps if Eru was attentive, he would have clapped and so forced others to join him. But his whole attention was focused on some two girls who stood near the drinks, ready to open them and serve the group. He had long lost interest in Antony's address. Not that he found anything particularly wrong with it. From his point of view, such talk could never win him a girl. He felt that Antony should have made a speech which would leave all the girls shivering with anxiety to shake his hand and kiss him and ask him to go to bed with them.

But if Eru thought it was a poor speech because it could not win a girl, everybody else found something wrong with it. Bitong was sitting directly opposite him. He had expected Antony to look in his direction and say:

“As for marriage, if anybody wants to know anything about it, let him ask Mr. Bitong.” But he had said absolutely nothing about marriage. Secondly, as president, he shared the outrage of the group that Antony had merely insulted them. He looked round and saw the many outsiders who had attended the party, and shook his head sadly. Why had Antony said all that about them? What was wrong with calling him a white man? Was it hot water they were pouring on his body to change his colour? They had attended welcome parties for children from other tribes who had gone just to Nigeria for a week. And their tribesmen had called them kings and gods. And the children had struck their breasts and said yes. Why should Biongong not receive the same treatment from their own son?

It was again remarked to the hearing of the President that soon after the cameraman went round taking pictures of the strong drinks and the champagne, Anuse ordered them to be returned to his cellar unopened. He promised to ask for the drinks to be brought back. Likume naturally had a very hot and humid climate. July was the worst month in that regard, even for those who sat along the main road.

Anuse got the worst part of the deal. He had chosen for himself a conspicuous position under the brightest electric bulb to the right of Antony. Now he regretted it because the atmosphere suddenly became too hot for him. His chest could be seen rising and falling under the impact of the embarrassment and heat. All round his face beads of cold sweat suddenly burst, coalescing into tiny rivulets which cascaded over his fleshy jaws on to his colourful gown. He was by nature a very irritable man and he was at that moment at war with himself. He was fighting against his natural impulses to use a stick on Antony right then to show him how deeply he felt the injury to his pride.

It was no longer a question of childish disobedience. Antony had declared full-scale war on him. He remembered the sudden return, Antony’s refusal to meet his visitors in a respectable way, his reluctance to yield to the suggestion of marriage, and the decision to live with his aunt. There was only one explanation for all the insults. He rose to the centre of the floor again and begged for silence.

“My brothers and sisters, hear me again.”

Everybody sat up with great relief. It was as though a word from him at that very delicate moment was the one thing they all needed to have the muscle and nerve even to rise and go away.

"It is myself that I blame for this kind of thing that we are witnessing. Those words that MASTER Antony NKOALECK (he bowed to him) has just vomited tous, take them as an advice. When I call him my son, it is because I know that my brother's child is my child. He has shown me that I am wrong. Whenever you are training another person's child, look for yours too. Another person's child is always another person's child.

"We came here this evening to eat and drink our money. We have not done that yet. There is still food and wine. Nothing has been tasted. But, forgive me. I will not be with you to the end. I want to leave now. My heart is not good enough for me to remain here with you." Here he turned toward Antony and bowing ironically again and said:

"I thank you, sir." And then he went away.

The President of the meeting tried in vain to persuade him to return. "Whosai whisky and champagne we you hide'am?" somebody shouted to the amusement of the rest.

Two gifts were brought to Antony from his father Chief Fuo-Ndee in the village. One was long and wrapped in paper. It might have been a walking stick or an umbrella. The other also wrapped, looked like a stool. Antony accepted both silently, took the letter which accompanied them and put into his pocket without opening it to read.

Chapter Twelve

With Anuse's departure from the scene, chaos set in and made it impossible for anybody who respected himself to linger there much longer. It began with the scramble over beer. It was true that they had contributed their money wholeheartedly to come and welcome Antony. It was true also that everybody had felt disgraced by what Antony had said. But it was even more true that no matter the circumstances under which the party had broken up, if they missed their drinks that night, they would never get any refund from Anuse. Therefore, they thought it wise to take advantage of Anuse's anger and get their money's worth before he came back to give new orders.

It did not start riotously. A few people walked up to the table, took a bottle of beer each and then returned to their seats with glasses. Others followed suit. Soon there were not enough glasses. Those who had been drinking out of the glasses saw that they were being cheated by those who drank directly from the bottle. They rose to acquire themselves extra bottles. It was at this point that it turned into a pell-mell. Some now found it safer to carry their beer home and drink there. Whole cartons were lifted and taken away by those who had the strength. Fights broke out over the struggles, bottles were broken and people wounded. Beckongncho lay back watching in dazed silence and pity. He wondered why Antony had not discussed what he was to say with them. In the midst of all this, Antony remained in his seat, shocked, angry but not ashamed. He had never in his life thought of Anuse as anything other than his own father, although he was only an uncle, and although they disagreed on so many points.

The rest of the group who had attended the party might have found something wrong with what he said. He could argue, although he would not easily convince anybody that he had not offended them. But for Anuse to rise in front of the whole tribe and say that of him, he found that far worse than all the insults that the people

kept throwing at him from the crowd. It even occurred to him that Anuse must have grown jealous of his achievement, and of the fact that it was not his own child who had achieved all that. Otherwise, why bring his parentage into the incident?

While he sat wondering with his head bowed, he caught sight of a tallish figure moving up to him. Antony's sight was not the best in the world, which was why he wore spectacles. Although much work had been done to light up the entire compound a man who had eye problems would have to strain his eyes to recognise anybody coming towards him from the lights. In addition to the darkness, Antony was angry, which impaired his vision all the more.

The man was just as tall as Antony himself, and was wearing a much rumpled black coat over a bluish shirt whose sleeves were so long that they extended a good distance beyond the hands of the coat, covering his hands to just before his thumb-nails. The old man's name was Pa Godsabi, an old commercial rival and an enemy of Anuse's. He had a daughter who was a friend to Angela. His daughter was the only person to whom Angela had told the story of how Antony had told her off. She had communicated the information to her father so that he could see if Antony could be introduced into their own family. If that work, it might be possible for her to win Antony's heart.

The man had not been invited to the party, but he had come all the same, hoping that he would find an opportunity, he saw his chance. At first, Antony was not anxious to look at him because he assumed that he was one of the natives coming to reprimand him.

"Let me say my own good evening," the man said. Antony looked up at him from his sitting position. The face was mildly familiar. His hair was parted in the middle in the *bogy-bogy* fashion as it was usually described. He must have been in his late sixties. His forehead was heavily lined with age, but his eyes were sharp and wide. He wore a moustache that had been wound to end in whiskers on either side of his mouth. His jaws were sunken and there were scanty hairs on his chin. His neck was skinny but he insisted on wearing a shirt whose collar was held together not by a button but by an old neck-tie that looked more like a tobacco leaf. On his right breast were pinned some three or four medals, indicating that he was an ex-service man.

There was a certain dignity about him and it seemed to Antony that he was a man who had once tasted wealth. The coat he wore dropped to just mid-way down his thighs.

"Whether in the night like this my child will recognise me, I don't know," the old man said.

Antony narrowed his eyes and looked closer.

"Pa Godsabi, somebody came to his aid.

Antony nodded almost disinterestedly. Not that the name immediately meant something to him.

"Pa Godsabi, pa Godsabi," he repeated to himself. "I know him." He then turned to the old man.

"My son," he called Antony. "Will you listen to me?"

There was much friendliness in his eyes which made Antony feel some relief. Perhaps the man had come to give him a clue to the puzzling reaction of the whole tribe against him.

"I will, father," he said.

The old man leaned toward Antony and, supporting his chin in his left hand said:

"My son, book is book, life is life. There was silence.

"After all, the book that you have learnt, there is still one thing left to know – your people. You have still got to learn how to live with your people. You hear me?"

"I do, father." Antony's voice took on the tone of an embarrassed whisper. He knew it was no suggestion. It was a criticism of his conduct. He did not know what he had done wrong, but he now seemed ready to learn.

"Perhaps you love your people, nobody can tell. But you don't know them" the old man went on. "See what people are leaving behind. See the fight, the wounds people are going to carry this night. This tribe is cursing you."

Antony tried to say something.

"It is not in this place and this night that we shall want to know what you have to say about what you have just done. Tomorrow is another day. If you like to discuss things, come and see me tomorrow."

He told Antony how to get his house and the time he would be at home. He then went away. Antony soon left the scene. Beckongncho remained in his seat. As soon as Antony had crossed

the gutter that separated the scene of the party from the street that led to Fence and beyond, he hurried after him and called. When Antony stopped, he reminded him that he had forgotten to take the gift from the Chief along.

"I'll come for it tomorrow," Antony said as if he had left it behind deliberately.

"The Chief's gifts?" Beckongncho inquired. "And you have not even opened to see what they are? I'll find a child to help you take it home."

It was Nchindia who offered to carry them to Ma Kata's place where Antony had said he would be spending the night.

He did not see Eru who had disappeared as soon as the girls serving the drinks had been driven away by the people fighting over the beer. He spent the whole night awake, unable to understand what he had done to drive the whole tribe so mad. He was, however, convinced that there was a very serious error of misunderstanding somewhere which the old man might point out to him the following day.

Anuse was extremely vengeful. He was still in bed contemplating on how to pay Antony back when Bitong came with the news learnt from Angela that he had really told her off before coming to the party. Angela had not attended the party. When those who had gone there returned to describe Antony as insane, she saw that it was the right moment to inform her parents of what he had done to her in his house.

With the reception of this piece of information, Anuse cut Antony off his mind. He went into the room where Antony had been staying and packed out all his things. He then called his children and asked them to take the things to Antony in his aunt's place. He also sent a message to be delivered to Antony:

"Tell Nkoaleck that I know that I did very great wrong in spending my money to make him a man. But let him know that his curses will not kill me. Tell him that I beg him in the name of God who made heaven and earth, never to put his foot in this my house again. Ever."

At 11 o'clock on Thursday morning, Antony left Bangula for Kosala to honour his appointment with Pa Godsabi. Godsabi's residence did not reflect either his wealth or the reputation he enjoyed as a Biongong Noble. He lived in a large sun-dried brick house with a thatched roof. The surroundings were very well-kept, however. There were four flower beds made by burying green bottles upside down to form first a triangle and then a circle on either side of the gravel passage that led from the road to the house. There was a rare air of freshness about the compound which was cut off from the light of the sun by many coconut trees that grew round the yard.

The man was relaxing in a lounge chair in his veranda when he came. On a cane table before him, a calabash of fresh palm wine had been set. He asked Antony to sit down. When the visitor had done so, he half rose from his chair, and looking into the window and asked loud:

"Who is there to give me something?"

"Me, Papa," a female voice answered from behind the house. One minute later, a young lady came out of the house and stood in front of the old man expectantly. She was fairly tall, broad-hipped and dark-brown in complexion. She must have been working in a garden behind the house, for her feet looked muddy. But even so, Antony could see that she was remarkably attractive in the light dress with her breast and the contours of her thighs and hips pressing sensuously against it. She had thick eyelashes which curved downward into her round cheeks.

"Yes, papa," she said to her father.

"You have not greeted the stranger," the old man said.

"I am sorry. Good morning please," she said with an enticing smile to Antony.

Antony smiled back indifferently.

"Give us another glass," the old man told her. She went into the house and brought a glass into which she poured some wine for Antony. The latter took it with thanks, tasted just a bit of it and then placed the rest on a side stool near him. If they had asked his

opinion, he would have objected because he did not drink alcohol. But he took it, just in case the man had been tempting him to see if he did not like to identify himself with the ways of his people at all. As soon as the girl went back into the house, Antony inquired:

“Is that your daughter, pa?”

“She is my daughter,” the old man said. “But that is not why I called you here,” he added unnecessarily.

Antony looked briefly at her and then looked away. When he looked at the old man, he found not condemnation but something illusive.

There was silence. Antony felt a bit ashamed of himself. He felt that he was being misunderstood again. He had not asked about her for any other reasons than common courtesy. It was not that he took the old man’s invitation lightly.

But the old man had not intended his answer as reprimand. If anything, he was glad that Antony had seen his daughter. In his calculating mind, the problem of his daughter’s welfare was more important than any disgrace the tribe had suffered at Antony’s hands. He had spoken to Antony in a manner that was to make his motives for ingratiating himself with him less obvious. He paused for a while and then introduced the subject. He allowed Antony to speak first.

Antony talked with very great contempt about his people’s attitude towards the education he had obtained. He pointed out that the M.Sc. which he had obtained was, as a matter of fact, not the highest rung in the academic ladder of degrees. There were many more masters degree holders around, many PhD holders. It was therefore unfair for people to make a god of him for doing just what everybody else was doing. He would feel ashamed to mention his degree among real intellectuals.

“We do not know the others who have all that,” the old man said. “Biongong knows only you, and so we are glad that you, our own child, have got it.... What you said was very true, and I praise you for have such a heart. Others might have been too proud to think that way.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Antony said.

“But there was a fault,” the man went on. “Not every truth is supposed to be spoken aloud. Not every thief is supposed to be carried through the market place. A thief in whom you have your

own blood should not be treated like any other thief, but like a thief who is a brother. Those were not the sort of things we expected you to say in that kind of place about Biongong. It was not only Biongong who attended the party. Strangers too were there. We were in the market. That is why everybody was annoyed. And see how you were dressed. Do you not have a coat? Do you not have a tie?

"I have a coat and tie quite all right."

"When do you wear them? When you are going to sleep?"

Antony found the humour irresistible. He smiled and said:

"I don't wear them to sleep, I wear them on some occasions. On some, I do not. In fact, I do not have any special occasion for wearing them..."

"Yesterday was the occasion for wearing such things. But you did not. People expected to see you dressed like your title sounds. They did not. And see how you spoke, without anything written down on a piece of paper for you to read to us. You spoke from your mind as though we were not important enough for you to talk seriously. Do you think Anuse who wrote all that down does not have a head to keep the things inside? And you refused to use the telephone which would have enabled people in any corner to Likume to hear your voice!"

Antony did not interrupt him. Why would he want the whole of Likume to hear him talk? Whatever way Anuse looked at it, the crowd that had come to welcome him was too small for him to use a microphone. Nobody had problems hearing him, he thought.

"Those were the things which made people angry. But I am not saying that all the things which the people did were correct, and that only you were wrong."

Silence.

"I began by saying there was one fault. I should have said there were many faults. You committed one, we committed ten. Anuse should not said all that. I know he was angry. But if it was me, I should have kept quiet. And the people too, that is not the way to react. Perhaps I am saying all this because I came there uninvited."

Antony was struck dumb with admiration for the man's wisdom. He wanted to ask why the man said he had not been invited. But he assumed that a man with such wisdom could never be in the same camp with Anuse.

"There is only one thing for you to do now," the man began again. "Go back to Anuse and tell him you are sorry. Write a book to the meeting and say you are sorry. A man cannot be wiser than his tribe. Do not feel too big to bend down before your people if they are annoyed with you."

Antony was very grateful for the fatherly advice. But he told the man that Anuse had already thrown him out of his house.

"That is the more reason why you should go and beg. He will listen," the man told him.

Antony had no real desire to offer any apologies to either Anuse or the tribal meeting for what he had done. He had spend the whole night wondering whether he had actually been so wrong. Now the old man had strengthened his opinion of himself that he had acted honestly, and that Anuse and his tribesmen bore much of the blame for the failure of the party.

So the whole tribe was not mad after all, he told himself. It came to him as a very great relief that there was at least one man in the whole Biongong tribe who saw some sense in what he had said. For that recognition alone he decided he would give the man all the love and respect that he was capable of giving to anybody.

He began to see other virtues, or rather the old man's wisdom blinded him to other forms of behaviour which he would not bear to see in others. For instance, the man explained that one reason he did not roof his house with zinc was because when rain fell on zinc, it disturbed his sleep. Also, the old man said, when the rain was falling, a thief could very easily break into your house without your hearing it. He said he did not put electricity in his house because it could easily shock and kill if carelessly used. As for alcohol, he said it was detrimental to health. All these spurious arguments seemed to Antony at that time perfectly normal.

Even if he had the intention of apologising, however, Anuse's subsequent behaviour made it impossible for him to think of doing so any more. The news of his visit to Pa Godsabi's house was

brought to Anuse while he was still conversing with the old man. Anuse was told that after the fiasco, the previous night the man and Antony held a very long talk.

Anuse and Pa Godsabi were not enemies in the strict sense of the word. But they treated each other with contempt that bordered on outright hostility. Anuse held Godsabi of little consequence since he could not manage a small firm. On his part, Godsabi looked on Anuse's wealth as ill-gotten. He called it blood money.

The two had once been rivals in the office and cocoa trade. At that time the old man had two companies employing over 200 workers, all members of their tribe. Stories of "M"nyongo", "the art of gaining wealth through the sacrifice of human beings to witchcraft, were just as rife then as they now existed. People who suddenly became rich without any visible means of income were at the mercy of the "Monyongo" scandal, even when their wealth was genuinely acquired. And once a man was associated with "Monyongo", it was hard to ever wash himself clean. For one thing, he was never openly accused for him to openly defend himself. The news spread by rumour – "have you heard that..." Or "people are saying that..." Once a man was branded an agent of "Monyongo" he became literally an outcast, a *persona non grata*. He bore all the blame for any sicknesses and deaths among his close friends, family and relatives. And since there would always be sickness and death in every family, he was doomed to endless accusations. If the wealth declined, it was believed that he had been shamed to the extent that he could no longer offer any friends or relatives to augment his trade. If his business rose, people pointed to the graves of dead relatives and friends, or to the sick in the hospital.

Pa Godsabi had once been accused as an agent of "Monyongo". And at the heat of the rumours, one of his stores collapsed killing seven workers. It might have been an accident. In fact, police investigations proved that it was an accident. But people had their own interpretation. It was believed that he had sold the people to the devil. Relatives of the dead men marched up to his house demanding the return of the lives of their dead brothers. Only the intervention of the police saved him. But that did not save his company. Within one week, all his workers deserted him.

When the workers who abandoned him applied to Anuse, he promptly employed them. Gradually, it was also rumoured that it was Anuse who had started the rumour that the old man had dealings with “Monyongo”. There was nothing to prove this point, but the ease with which he engaged the defected workers was a very strong argument in favour of the belief. Pa Godsabi spoke of Anuse’s treachery in beer bars, street corners and market places. So too, did Anuse speak of his devilish activities.

That was a very long time ago. But the two had never reconciled. So when the secret was communicated to Anuse that Antony had been seen in friendly conversation with his old enemy, he immediately suspected a conspiracy between Pa Godsabi and Antony to put him to shame. It was he himself who put the idea into Antony’s head that a possible marriage relationship existed between himself and old man’s daughter.

Antony soon decided to explore that possibility, if only to take his revenge on Anuse’s unjustified aggression towards him. Fortunately, in his view, there was very much to recommend the girl: she was very beautiful, and her father of a very understanding disposition.

Anuse refused to speak to Antony when he came to his house that evening. He told him: “That your plan with Godsabi will not work. Why did he give you only his daughter to marry? He should have added his wife there so that you know he loves you”

The very next day, Bitong and Anuse summoned an extraordinary session of the tribal meeting. There, Anuse announced:

“My people, Anuse is what he is, not because he called Nkoaleck his child. It is because he closes his eyes when he gives. I was not doing all that I did for him so that he should come and build a house for me. I have houses. I have lorries. And Anuse had all those things while still paying the school fees of that man. We have called you here today to tell you one thing. I have decided to forget about him as my child, as my blood relation. I want you to do the same. We have called you here today as the leaders of the tribe down here to tell you to forget what the name Nkoaleck has ever meant to you. From today, we want you to live as if such a thing has never been born in this tribe. If Nkoaleck does not want us, we do not want him too. And we want you to know that the Chief at home will soon hear of our decision. The shoulder cannot grow above the head....”

The news of the meeting and the decision taken made another visit by Antony to Pa Godsabi very necessary. In addition to what was being said about his behaviour at the party, a rumour had already reached Antony's ears to the effect that it was Pa Godsabi who had made him tell Bitong's daughter off in order to marry his. Antony found this very ridiculous because the first time he met the old man was at the party. And he had fact that the man had a daughter. He quite remembered how the man had rebuked him for venturing to ask him a question about the girl who had served them wine. He did not think it necessary to raise such a point on his visit there.

This time the old man received him very cheerfully. He told Antony that he should not bother himself to apologise any longer since it was clear that Anuse would not want to listen to him. He described Anuse as childish in extremes. Then the conversation turned on other matters. Antony loved listening to his wisdom. They seemed to abhor or like the same persons and things.

The man spoke of his youthful days, about money, and how trade had completely declined since independence. He described himself as a man of simple taste. Antony spoke of education and religion. He spoke of the decline and loss of morality in all facets of life, since the departure of the white man. He spoke of the tragedy facing the black man – the attempt to telescope history, to achieve in one day what it took Europe and America centuries to achieve. Honesty and fair dealing, he pointed out, were not consistent with the desire to acquire riches overnight. He said it was a slow process of awakening to the realizations that riches in themselves were not an end but a means to happiness.

It was this point that the old man called for his daughter and asked her to roast some groundnuts for them. This time, when she came she took the initiative and greeted Antony first.

Once again, Antony found her very beautiful. No doubt, he said to himself, the people had believed that his relationship with the man had something to do with her presence in that house. When she brought the groundnuts and set them on the table, Antony decided to say something to her.

"I like your dress," he remarked. "It's so nice." She was wearing a pretty orange gown with the contours of her body showing again through it.

"Yes," she said with an attractive smile. "Papa bought it for me."

"What's your name?"

"Vicky, Victorine."

"Do you know me?"

She hesitated for a while and then said: Yes I do." Her mouth seemed to have been made for smiling.

"Who am I?"

"You are Mr. Antony Nkoaleck."

Antony studied her. Victorine was a different kind of personality from Angela. Angela was open, and spoke sometimes even childishly on whatever she thought or knew. Vicky was different. She sat with the reserve of a lady of honour. She thus seemed to weigh her words in her mind which made her talk very precise.

She was slightly shorter than Angela, but looked rather flashy in dress. Angela had been obviously dark. But Vicky's complexion was uncertain. From a distance, she passed for a light-complexioned lady. At close range, it seemed as if she was naturally black or dark, not light. She had obviously done a lot of bleaching! The knuckles of her fingers, her elbows, knees and feet (below the ankles), contrasted sharply in their darkness, with the rest of the body. She belonged to the type Eru described as Fanta-Coka, meaning that she was a mixture of dark and light shades.

She also had sharp eyes, but hers seemed capable of closing and opening in a very suggestive manner. Her eyebrows were two thin pencil lines, her nose long, her nostrils also wide and slightly turned outward. Her mouth was not only wide but very tempting, with a gap on the upper line of her teeth that accentuated the attractiveness of her enticing smile.

Antony smiled and then turned to the old man. "What does she do?"

The man looked at her and then she said:

"I go to school. I am in City Girls."

"What class? I hope you don't mind my asking you so many questions. Pa is my father too."

“Oh no. don’t mention,” she said. “I am in Form Five. I am finishing in June.”

“June?”

“Yes.”

“What do you intend to do after that? Go to high school? Work? Marry?” He was looking at her when he asked the string of questions.

Gradually the pair of sensuous lips that adorned her wide tempting mouth pulled apart in a rather protracted smile. Then she said:

“Ask Papa.”

Chapter Thirteen

Three days after the welcome party fiasco, Antony wrote to his cousin Ephraim Njikem who worked and lived in Tetseale. He informed Ephraim that he would be coming to Tetseale to submit an application for employment to the Ministry of Education by the end of the month. After he posted the letter, it occurred to him that if he got employed soon, he might be asked to start work immediately. That might in turn make it difficult for him to visit his ailing father, Chief Fuo-Ndee of Nkokonoko Small Monje. He therefore decided to go first to Small Monje and thereafter, proceed to Tetseale. This trip to Small Monje, however, had nothing to do with his aunt's repeated plea that he needed to undergo some "contryfason" in the village in order to get the tribe once more behind him!

Early on Tuesday morning on the 24th of August, he left Likume, arriving Small Monje on Wednesday afternoon. Although the roads were in very bad state, it was not too difficult to find a lorry that would take him as far as Mbi-nzeah, the main stop from which travellers to the palace of Small Monje would have to trek for about 11 kilometres. From Mbi-nzeah, he decided not to follow the longer route to the palace but to trek the three kilometres to the District Office.

Although he had been away for very many years, Antony was no stranger to the place. Many people recognised him from the distance. It was one of his tribesmen who told the DO about him. The man described him to the DO as "Prince Antony Nkoaleck, doctor of book." Because he was the first graduate of the tribe, many people described him as the doctor of book in Small Monje.

When he entered the premises of the District Office, he walked straight to the DO's office, knocked and went in.

"Antony Nkoaleck, M.Sc. Political Science, Legon, Ghana," he introduced himself.

The DO rose from his seat, walked round his desk and shook Antony's hands respectfully.

"DO Martin Ezeatebong," he said. "I manage here." He showed Antony where to sit and then standing back and clasping his hands childishly below his pot-belly and looking at him admirably and said: "Welcome, doctor. I have heard of you over and over, and I have been longing to meet you."

Antony nodded, smiled with a touch of pride and looked round the office of three large cupboards and several empty shelves. There were no books, only piles of dusty government files that contained nothing, for all Antony knew. He then looked very briefly and assessingly at the DO.

He saw a large bald head – the shape of an inverted pear, over a heavily lined forehead, drink-sodden eyes, a broad nose, a large scattered moustache and a wide mouth from which a foul breath issued. He was not a man of impressive height, but had bulk. His belly was large and oval, his buttocks slightly protruding, and his legs rather short for his height.

"So anything I can do for you, doctor," the DO asked as he walked round to resume his seat. Antony leaned backward on his seat and placing his elbow on the top edge of the chair straightened his right leg. He then crossed his left leg over his knee and rubbing the inside of his shoe and said:

"Ya, ya, ya. I stopped first to say hi, and then to see if you can send your driver or anybody to drive me down to the palace. I have not seen my dad for ages. And I usually have lots of problems walking long distance!"

"No program," the DO said. "You are the alpha and the omega of this society. If I cannot render that service myself, what am I good for? I'll take you down myself."

Antony's encounter with DO Martin was more beneficial intellectually than historically. The man could conveniently have walked right out of his manuscripts – a dullard commanding all the honours in the world while intellectual giants like himself have to trek for days. Here was a real life figure of administrative imbecility,

something he planned to devote a lot of space to in his novel: **HOW A PEOPLE DIE**. He had from his imagination created DO's who looked stupid and behaved stupidly. Here was a real life example!

When they got to the main gate into the palace Antony climbed in and asked the DO to follow him. The man hesitated. It was not because of the rotundity of his belly which looked an obvious excuse. He seemed afraid. He had his reasons to fear because the Elders had made it clear that they loathed his presence in their land. One reason he fell in love with Antony was because he knew Antony's position in the tribe and could exploit a cordial relationship with him to bring himself closer to the hearts of the people.

"Come on, climb in," Antony said. The man climbed in and the two walked down into the palace almost hand-in-hand!

When the DO's vehicle stopped outside the gate, two windows in the waiting room or outer chamber of the palace swung open and heads peeped through. Moments later three men came out and stood on the veranda watching the visitors. There was a tall, huge one-eyed man wearing a large velvet *jumpa*, a medium-sized man wearing a heavily patched dirty sleeveless singlette over a brown loin cloth, and a very small man in an over coat that actually touched the ground.

As soon as he climbed over the fence, Antony recognised them all as the eldest of the Elders of the tribe – Ndenwontio, Achiebefuo and Ngobefuo in that order. As the two men walked down towards the waiting room, Antony felt worried by the fact that the three men were together at that time. He had received word that his father was not well. He wondered whether the case had worsened. Ngobefuo was the head of the Elders, and Achiebefuo was his assistant.

There was some interchange of glances amongst the old men as Antony approached. The main cause for concern was the fact that Antony, a son of the soil was moving hand-in-hand with an alien infiltrator. Did Nkoaleck know the position he occupied in their hearts as far as the future of the throne of Small Monje was concerned? Did he know how much they dreaded the presence of the DO?

Ngobefuo shook hands with Antony alone. It would appear that the DO had suspected Ngobefuo would not shake his hands and so he did not even make the attempt. As soon as they were seated on their various stools, Antony inquired about the Chief.

“Not well, but not dying,” Ngobefuo said. “He is only waiting for his own day.”

Some relief shone in Antony’s visage.

“We heard you had returned from the white man’s country,” Ngobefuo began.

Antony nodded and said: “Yes, father.”

“The Chief sent a message...”

“I got everything...” Antony cut in.

“We were thinking that a book to say ‘thank you’ will reach here before you yourself,” Achiebefuo said. It was a reprimand.

“It couldn’t,” Antony said.

Ngobefuo noticed the sharpness of Antony’s reply, paused for a second to get displeasure out of his mind and then asked:

“For how many days are you here?”

“Not days,” he said. “I came just to salute. I am still trying to see how and where I will settle in this damn place. I will talk to the Chief and return to spend the night with my friend, the DO. Tomorrow, I leave for Tetseale to hand in my papers.”

Ngobefuo tightened his thin lips against his toothless gums and stared into Antony’s face with disapproval. The words “my friend” with regards to the DO seemed to cut through his flesh like a carving knife. Luckily for Antony, not given to looking at people to see the effects of his words, he had not been watching Ngobefuo when he said it. It was the DO himself who had caught the scowl.

Antony was led into the presence of Chief Fuo-Ndee as soon as he finished talking to Ngobefuo. It was an ill-lit room down in the palace. Paramount Chief Fuo-Ndee lay in a sitting position on an almost bare mattress. The upper part of his body leaning on two large grass pillows was bare as was probably the lower part that was covered with a large brown blanket. Two women sat by his bedside, one on either side. A table stood near the bed between one of the women and the bed. On it was a jug of palm win, several bottles of half drunk medicines from herbs, a horn, a large pipe, a spoon and two plates containing half-eaten *Abe-letsea* and *Ngapsambiè* Under

the bed stood two buckets, one empty and the other half full with an old towel lying over the mouth. A bush lamp that gave off suffocating fumes hung over the head of the Chief.

"I salute you, your highness," Antony greeted. It took the octogenarian Chief a whole minute to ask:

"Who is there?"

"Your first piss," Ngobefuo told the Chief. The Chief, breathing heavily, pulled up his brows, forced his eyes open as if waking from deep sleep and then called:

"Nkoaleck!"

"Your Highness," he responded.

"Glad you have come," the Chief said in his throat. "How is his highness feeling?" A chortle was heard from somewhere down the Chief's throat and then he said:

"Fighting with life, fighting with death."

Antony breathed in and out and said:

"God will help."

The Chief lifted a finger painfully and warned Antony:

"Let me not hear that you are going anywhere again until you have lowered me into my grave."

"What does his highness say?" Antony asked.

"Let this be the last journey I am hearing. Let me not hear that you have made another journey to the white man's country. If you came to hear that I was no more, in whose hands shall I have put the key of this house?"

"I am not going anywhere any more, your highness," he said.

The Chief immediately sank into a sleep so deep that one of the women had to feel his pulse. Antony would learn later that the Chief had not slept for months.

Antony spent the night at the DO's house and the following morning he left Small Monje. He did not care about talking to the Chief. He felt that the Chief needed immediate medical attention, not his company. He was anxious to hurry to Tetsale, deposit his application and then look for a doctor to take care of his father.

If Antony thought his encounter with the DO had added another chapter to his books, that was his business. His nonchalance towards the throne angered the Elders, especially as he failed to see Chief Fuo-Ndee's reaffirmation of his love and respect for him. Ngobefuo and the other Elders were not happy with the haste with which Antony rushed through Small Monje. He had not acted with sufficient concern for the tribe, the way a distant child like Beckongncho would have done.

He had not inquired about affairs of the throne, how matters have been managed since the Chief had been sick for so long; what the position of the Elders was, should the Chief die; how many women had given birth, how many children were going to school, how many of the Chief's wives were pregnant, how many daughters had been given out for marriage, and how many may be ripe within the next couple of years.

He could as well have spend enough time with the Chief because on his return to Likume from Tetseale, he would not find a doctor who would travel all the way to Small Monje to consult. They would all ask him to bring down the patient. On the part of the Elders, the Chief's state was not such that he could be moved about. Not when so many native doctors were ready to pitch their tent in the palace or next to the Chief's bed.

Chapter Fourteen

The *DO's* land-rover drove Antony the following morning as far as Mbi-nzeah whence he continued to Tetseale. Ephraim Njikem had actually been expecting him. He had received Antony's letter and he knew him to be a man who kept his word strictly.

Njikem lived in that part of the town called Swine Quarter. It was so called not because pigs lived there but because the main market and butcheries for pigs were once situated there. He rented a six-bedroom house which occupied a space that would have been just enough for two comfortable bedrooms in Likume, or any of the smaller cities elsewhere. The house had long been reduced to five bedrooms because the wall separating the parlour from an adjoining room had been broken down in order to increase the size of the sitting room.

In the evening of the day after he arrive in Tetseale, a reception was arranged for him in Ephraim's residence. It took place in Ephraim Njikem's sitting room, with some less important guests sitting on the veranda. Ephraim had taken care not to invite more people than his premises could handle. But the most discomforting thing about the house had nothing to do with space. The guests outside constantly twitched their noses, and with good reason. Just behind the wall that separated Ephraim's compound from that of his neighbour was a pit latrine that seemed to yawn every second.

The story went that Pa Bamii, Ephraim's landlord and Monsieur Amungu, his neighbour disagreed vehemently on the drainage for the rain water that flowed from the main road. Amungu had a smaller piece of land and so tried in vain to persuade Bamii to permit the drainage to pass through his land. Bami's next move was to build a large wall separating the two plots. Amungu was then compelled to create the drainage on his land. Since his plot was higher up the slope, the water found its way blocked by the wall. When with time Bamii constructed his kitchen, Amungu decided to hurt him. He

dug his pit latrine just half a metre away. After all, he argued, it was his land and he was free to build whatever he liked wherever he liked.

Bamii did not have tenants for a long time. Pa Bamii's house was the only one available in the area which was closest to his office when Ephraim took up service in Tetseale several years ago. Thus, even though people in Ephraim's kitchen could not only hear somebody groan in the latrine but even hear faeces drop right down the pit, the presence of the latrine was no longer a discomfort except for a stranger like Antony

There were twenty one guests in all. They were mostly intellectuals, unlike the block-headed ragamuffins as Antony regarded the guests at the welcome party in Likume. They included Senior Civil Servants: Ephraim himself, a Chief of Ninkemo Ijaso – Assistant Chief of Personnel in the National Museum, a businessman who everybody called Patron, and who was described as the Godfather of the Anglophone students studying in the University in Tetseale. There was Akombe Edouard, a Journalist attached to Starlight, the friend to whom Eru had sent a letter introducing Antony.

The rest of the guests were made up of University Students from different Faculties. They were mainly the executive of BUUS, the Biongong Union of University Students. This comprised of the President, a Second Year Student from the Faculty of Laws and Economics; the Treasurer, a third Year Medical Student; the Financial Secretary, a second Year Theology student, and the Minutes' Secretary, a Second Year student from the Department of Modern Letters.

There were also some four ladies whom Ephraim had taken time to introduce to Antony as the "Cream of the Biongong Female Intelligentsia." There was Emilia Nakandaar, from the Faculty of Laws and Economics. She was scarcely more than a metre and a half in height. Very dark in complexion, ebony black, she was wearing a wig, but had Antony not looked very closely, he would not have noticed the difference because it looked so much like her hair.

From his early assessment of her, Antony thought she looked aggressive, even in silence. She did not seem to agree with many people on any topic under discussion, and had something to say on almost every topic. She reminded Antony of an old woman he met several years ago. That was the woman with whom he had his first real sexual experience. The woman had ordered him to hurry up and get out so that more serious customers could come in.

Nakandaar behaved like the kind of woman who had lost all hope of ever getting married and so found no reason to respect men or comport herself with particular dignity and humility. She did not smoke in there, but it was obvious from the way she fingered a cigarette lighter that she could very easily have done so. She opened two bottles of beer with her teeth, while others waited patiently for the girls who were serving to come by!

She seemed to have a persecution complex and spoke as if everybody was against her. If somebody laughed from another group, she looked that way as though the joke was certainly to her discomfiture. Perhaps she had led such a mischievous life that she felt people knew about it and would like to ridicule her on that account.

There was Yolanda Akashuo, from the Bilingual Series. She looked soft and delicate. She wore a necklace and bangles of ivory, and had expressive love sick eyes and a thing long neck. She had very long hair which she would into a single lock which she caused to fall over her left breast. She was shorter than Nakandaar and slim, a stature which was accentuated by a tight-fitting pair of blue jeans that seemed to have been so tailored on her that you wondered how on earth she could take it off.

She looked even more open than Nakandaar. She was much lighter in complexion, and wore a large shirt that was virtually a skirt. She spoke clean English and was equally at home with French which she interspersed with a **pbrrrr** sound, a mannerism which entered her speech system on her return from a nine-months Biligual Training course in Besançon in France. She spoke loud and laughed long, tabbing the nearest listener on the shoulder or thigh as she did so. She moved as though she were dancing, and was capable of taking several impressions within a short distance. The only thing that seemed out of proportion was her breasts. They seemed a bit too large and from Antony's view, that partly explained why she wore a large shirt.

The third Lady was Ruthie Frumongo, a third year Medical Student. Humility and modesty were written all over her brownish face and body. She kept her hair low, the only decoration on it being a plastic rose flower attached to a hair pin. She wore small blue earrings which matched her thin necklace, dress and sandals. Her features were very pronounced: narrow slanting eyes that stretched half the distance of each jaw, a broad nose and wide mouth unadorned with makeup of any sort. She had a most gracious smile, something remotely reminiscent of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

She had long thin hands, long fingers with nails trimmed right at the base. She looked timid and spoke only into the ears of the lady who sat by her. Since she did not look into people's faces you hardly noticed the whiteness and charm in her eyes. And when she spoke, she seemed to place her handkerchief over her mouth as though she had a dental problem which she did not want anybody to see.

The nipple of her breasts were certainly sharp and although she wore a brassiere, Antony could easily notice them piercing through her chest like pencil heads. He thought with a gentle smile, of the small drawing of breasts behind Eru's toilet door in Likume. She wore her dress long, well below her knees unlike the other two girls next to her who wore miniskirts. She would very easily have passed for a Reverend Sister.

There was Donna Abingod, from the Advanced Teacher's Centre. She seemed to have been bathed in bleach. Everything about her looked artificial to an exaggerated degree: a wig that fell over her broad shoulders like a shawl, and descended over her face like a small curtain which she was talking to. She had small but piercing eyes through which a world of experience shone like the crystal ball of a clairvoyant.

Her eye brows carefully shaved off had been replaced with two long eye-pencil strokes running from just above the eye near the base of her nose right into the nest of horse hair on her head. Her lips were deep red, like a fresh wound around the mouth of which blood had coagulated. She wore ear rings that virtually rested on her shoulders. Her breasts were large and with a roundness which showed above a blouse that was deliberately sewed to advertise them, and out of which they threatened to burst. She wore high-heeled shoes which looked more or less like stilts, and Antony wondered how she climbed on to them, or how she carried herself about on them with so much ease.

There were three other little girls serving. They were beautiful, more beautiful than the university girls, but Ephraim did not introduce them. Either he forgot or he concluded that any girl below university level was too low for his learned brother.

Ephraim may have wasted his time in going through all the trouble of selecting the girls because Antony had come to Tetseale for a specific reason: to deposit his dossiers with the Ministry of Education, contact the authorities in the University and try to see the possibilities of teaching there. He saw the ladies therefore in an entirely different light from that intended by his hosts.

The ladies, on their part, no matter how well they pretended, knew Antony was young, handsome, learned and most importantly, unmarried. Since they too were unmarried, anything could happen. You never could tell from which angle your luck would come, they must have thought. They were all aware of the fact that many unmarried men would turn to down play the idea of marriage at a gathering such men would behave towards prospective partners as if they did not really matter, even though marriage was the most serious problem on their minds.

But Antony would be different. In the first place, his brief stay in the seminary had made him believe that he did not need the company of a woman to live comfortably. He could barely tolerate their presence. Even if he did, he was never in the habit of getting into an unnecessarily deep conversation with any woman. At least, not the way Eru and the others did so easily. What made him even more unresponsive to the women's attractive presence was the fact that not too long ago he had an experience with Angela which had only worsened his attitude towards women. His brief encounter with her had unsettled him to the extent of even affecting his concentration on his writings.

Secondly, these were not just ordinary girls, but *University girls*. That meant something else to him. While in Legon, he had seen how promiscuous University girls were. Not only in Legon but from all other universities he had heard stories of how they sold their bodies to earn passes at exams. Thus, he came to have a special

aversion for them; he believed that there was no woman to come out of any African university you could treat with respect or genuine affection. They all lived on make-up, and he saw any form of make-up, as a carefully calculated design to attract the attention of lecturers.

He always remembered a certain Ablavi Okusi, a study mate in the last year of the first degree programme, for whom he once wrote a term paper. He merely changed the position of the capital letters and then submitted the same paper to his head of the Economics Department. When the scripts were returned, he managed a C-. Ablavi whom he had helped received an A+. It was therefore common knowledge that the best scores could come only from girls.

Perhaps because of this prejudice, Antony found each of the girls deficient in some important respect. He saw the Bilingual girl, for instance, as too thin, too small and a bit too sophisticated for his liking; the Teachers Training girl was too fat, too obviously a whore, drew too much attention to herself and looked more like a painting than a human being. The medical student was the only one who seemed to attract him, but even she too, for all her virtues reminded him very much of the girl he longed to forget – Angela. Furthermore, she was far too reserved. The law student was too wild and too talkative for his taste.

All these factors made his lukewarm attitude very enigmatic and even embarrassing. And what they had that evening was the cream of the female intelligentsia of Biongong as a whole. He did not engage any of them in conversation and spoke to them always as a group, as though they all looked alike and behaved alike. He was far too aloof. He talked, one of the ladies would mention later, like a guitar with only one string: the research he had undertaken and the books he had set out to publish. He was never tired of showing people the letters from Heinemann of his first manuscript, a letter which indicated more that he had written something than that he was the great writer he gave listeners to believe. "I made mention of something of the sort in one of my books," he would say each time a man made a penetrating point about the political situation in the country.

When he got up to speak, he was very aware of the fact that he was speaking to learned company, or at least to people on their way up the academic ladder. He therefore spoke in good English.

"If I don't feel flattered by this fabulous arrangement to receive me here," he began without preamble, "then I am not honest to myself. Those who know me know that I have always been honest to myself. I can never thank you enough for your determination to help me find my feet in this interesting system of ours. I know how much it takes to prepare food and chill drinks. Let me express my sincere appreciation to our student sisters and brothers for the time spent in preparing for this party instead of poring over their books.

"Having been a student myself," he went on, "I think you need a break, for was it not said of old that *Much work and no play makes Jack and Jill lazy children?*"

The BUUS president led the clapping and then Antony went on to end his brief address. He said:

"I am back home and I am glad to see that you are glad to see me here. We shall work together, be it at the Ministry or at the University as some of you to make this a better place than we met it. I am talking of changing it through the power of the pen. The pen is mightier than the sword."

Not many speeches were made, but there was something very interesting in whatever was said. For example, when the BUUS President rose and addressed Antony as "Doctor Nkoaleck," there was a sharp protest from Antony. But, as the Bilingual Series lady would say later in a conversation, the protest was very much in the manner of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar rejecting the crown of Emperor – as a most cherished wish which modesty would not allow him to accept without enormous pressure.

"I honestly wish I were really a doctor," he tried to protest.

"You are a doctor," the BUUS President insisted, and then went on to explain.

"You have a Masters in Political Science. In the French system, a Masters is called a *Doctorat de Troisième Cycle*. Half the lecturers in this University are holders of the *Troisième Cycle*. And all are called Doctors."

This explanation was immediately followed by a misplaced quotation. In trying to draw attention to Antony's modesty and the momentary tendency to down-play his achievements, he said:

"As the great Shakespeare once said, the lizard which fell from a palm tree said it would strike its chest even if there was nobody to see it."

"Actually that proverb is by Chinua Achebe," Antony whispered to Ephraim.

"But what is the difference between Shakespeare and Achebe?" Ephraim asked and immediately added in the same light-hearted spirit that "Achebe is the Shakespeare of Africa."

The President of BUSS presented Antony with a well chilled bottle of Champagne as contribution from their Union to grace the occasion. Antony had never opened a Champagne before, although he had attended quite a few parties in which it was opened. But he got out of the situation without drawing any suspicion. Taking up the tray with the Champagne wrapped in a white napkin, he said:

"As our Elders say, grey hairs settled on a child because when they entered a house there was no elder. The gray hairs have entered the house in which we have Elders. Let it therefore not settle on my head." He then walked up to Patron and handed over the drink amidst many cheers.

There was much dancing that evening, although Antony, not very sure of his performance preferred to sit down most of the time, discussing what to him was of greater moment as far as the purpose of his visit was concerned. The idea of Doctor figured prominently in the discussions. Everybody argued that to even equate a Master's degree from an Anglo Saxon University with a *Doctorat de Troisième Cycle* was doing the holder of the Master's degree a disservice. The French degree, it was said, placed emphasis on volume rather than substance or quality.

Antony went to bed believing that he was indeed a doctor. But he had one frustration: the journalist friend of Eru's who was supposed to help him publish an article in the National Daily, *THE STARLIGHT*, turned out to be disappointment

The title of the short story was: *THE SECOND COMING*. The editor read a note appended to the central episode, a letter:

This is the story of a fictitious African country – the Republic of Kintampo – a former British colony that obtained Independence in 1960. Ten years afterwards, the excitement of self-government had waned and instead of the millennium promised, its African citizens are totally disillusioned and the country is on its knees. The roads that were built by the white man have decayed into footpaths, schools and hospitals closed down, cholera, typhoid, TB, GC and Syphilis are rife, infant mortality reaches alarming proportions. Business, industries for the making of soap, matches and other essential commodities closed down, drug addiction is the order of the day; crime wave reaches rocket heights; 2 out of three armed robbers are security men; the country is blacklisted abroad and so international cooperation declines.

An army takes over power and kills everybody in the administration, and sends a delegation to Queen Elizabeth II surrendering their sovereignty and inviting the British Government to come back and recolonize them on any terms. He noticed that the work still required much editing but said nothing. He next read the PREAMBLE TO THE LETTER:

African leader in/and out of power.

First he sells his conscience to his white overlord, Then his country. In exchange, he is assured to remain in power. Till death do they part; this guarantee becomes a license for him to practice the most inhuman actions against his own people and fatherland; prays for the land to evaporate. He is frightened by the very idea of opposition which is made up of more intelligent, patriotic citizens, armed with honesty, foresight and genuine patriotism, not the cloak from the colonialist which he uses for self-defence. He milks his fatherland dry, the overlord taking free and in return, sells arms with which to protect himself in power or destroy his brothers.

The leader who led them to independence had no notion of international politics, won the hearts of the people because he promised them total freedom, that everything produced will remain theirs; the colonialist accepted their request for self-rule simply because the man, for all the promises did not look like somebody who could create any problems, he did not have the means to carry out his plans, and so they knew that it would be only a matter of time before he abandoned the struggle. He created a condition of threat to his power and then offered him protection in exchange for continuous colonial intervention in their internal affairs;

He turned to the next page and read the letter to the end.

*The Chairman,
Forces of Rebirth of Kintampo
Tampol*

6th November, 1960.

Through the Secretary of State for African Affairs,

To Her Majesty,

Queen Elizabeth II

Buckingham Palace

London

England

Your Royal Imperial Majesty:

May God bless you. We of the armed forces of this crumbling state that was once an integral part of the British Empire have decided to take up our pen and write to you, even as the prodigal son did in the Bible.

Consequent upon a plebiscite held here on May 10th, 1960, this nation has decided to forfeit its independence and invite you to come back and save us. We of the armed forces have taken over power, but in our heart of hearts, we know that we are not technocrats. Our training has throughout been geared towards defending this country, and not of ruling it. It did not prepare us for the very intricate business of statecraft which our new positions have imposed on us.

We took over power not because we thought we would do better, but because things had gone out of control in the civilian regimes. Upon the death of President Ekwo Odiaro, the Presidency was taken over by President Memos Gang. This was in gross violation of the constitution which clearly stated that upon the death of the head of state, the president of the House of Assembly of would RULE FOR 70 DAYS, during which time, an election will be held from a list of candidates suggested by the House. Not only had Gang been living abroad for the past decade, but he was a half brother of the late President. It was said that his selection was as a result of the recommendation made by the dying Ekwo. Gang virtually lived in Italy, where he went every week, at the country's expense. Because he was nearly always absent, his Ministers took advantage and plundered the national treasury.

The army toppled and killed him in 1965, ruled for 14 months and then conducted elections; Bishop Essa Martin won and was President for 3 years. Your Imperial Majesty will learn from his foreign office of the outrages that were perpetrated during that period. The army took over in 1968. The army ruled for one year and then handed over to the civilians administration which ruled until last year. During these years, things have gotten from bad to worse.

We noticed that whether the civilian or military regime, the responsibilities of the rulers and officials for the welfare of the people under their charge became subordinate to the lust for wealth and power.

Even we of the army have come to see and believe that the harmony of the state cannot be achieved through repression of violent breaches, riot, sedition and rebellion of particular interests of individuals and groups, but by the understanding of the causes of the disorder. Rather than appeal for order and calm over the radio, let the head of state come down and see the people and take their pulse. Fear or any uneasiness to meet them is a sign of guilt at how much they have betrayed their people.

Morale in the army has collapsed totally. In order to maintain themselves in office, the four civilian governments spend lavishly on us, the army. But the wealth went to and was shared only by the senior officers. The rank and file remained in the miserable state. To make ends meet, they resorted to banditry and harassment of the citizenry. Each successive army regime has just made the wound deeper. At this moment in time we can no longer control our own men who have learnt to live through theft and torture. Two out of every three armed robbers are either of the police or the army, and yet, we cannot successfully check them.

Public executions seem merely to make them more ruthless in their robberies. Those who do not go out themselves supply the robbers with automatic pistols and the like. You cannot arrest or cause a thief to be arrested for fear of exposure. We have completely lost grip, but we cannot hand over to the civilians again because they too have lost every sense of direction. In the three sectors that sustain a country – education, health and security, we have failed and we hereby admit that we are incapable of taking our beloved country out of the mess. The training centres for teachers, nurses and the police or soldiers are filled with favourites who are both physically and mentally unfit for any positions of responsibility. We find ourselves in a fix.

By placing such emphasis on us, the army education has been severely undervalued as we are placed at loggerheads with teachers and the intelligentsia. The teachers have refused to teach our children, and those whom we force at gun-point to teach do so disinterestedly. We are paid, but can't teach our children. Everything is just going downhill. Untried armed robbers buy positions into the police force; teachers who never passed a single examination direct educational institutions, people who should be mere nurses are made to graduate as medical doctors with little or no training, and no calling at all.

Imperial majesty, rather than let our people die in silent ignorance, we have decided to turn to you even as the prodigal son did in the story in the Bible, to invite you to come back and govern us. We wish, on behalf of all the

well-meaning citizens of this country, apologise for ever asking for independence when we were yet so unripe to control our own destinies. We have finally admitted that white rule is superior, that the black man has no love for anybody else but himself! As you will find below, this document bears 10,000 signatures, including those of 4 fifths of the members and private organizations, traditional rulers, church authorities and quarter heads.

"This is not a short story," the editor said. "it is a complaint. It is like a rope round your neck. You publish such a thing you will be killed several times," he told him, folding the sheets of papers and returning to Antony.

"This is the very apotheosis of mediocrity," Antony told him.

The man shrugged.

"Is it a lie, what is in there?" Antony asked.

"That is hardly the question," the man said. "At any rate, I don't quite know what to make of it." He refused to discuss the matter any further.

"*Speak the truth and speak it ever,*" Antony quoted a familiar verse. "*He that hides the wrong he does, Does the wrong thing still.*"

"Let me tell you something," Edouard resumed. "The only way to ever have such a thing published anywhere in Africa is to turn it into a work of fiction."

"But what we are going through at the hands of incompetent leadership is not fiction," Antony pointed out.

The man refused to reconsider his decision. But Antony had picked up something from the meeting, even if he was too proud to admit it: he would write fiction.

Antony's name would not be mentioned again until at the end-of-year party at which the lady from the Teachers' Training would ask one of the boys who had engaged him for a dance:

"I think you went to that Dr. Nkoaleck's dancing school. How can you dance a whole record on the same spot?"

A long laugh would break out, a strong indication that Antony's behaviour at the party had been the subject of many a conversation long after the event.

Chapter Fifteen

There were three main items on Antony's programme for the next day: he was to visit the University Library and Bookstore to see how he could update his research, visit the Dean of the Faculty of Arts or the Vice Chancellor and finally go to the Ministry of National Education.

The University Library was situated just below the Chancellery. It was a sprawling unpainted structure that looked more like a museum than an environment to stimulate learning. The lawns in front as everywhere else in the campus were littered with rags, papers and dried leaves that might have spent months where they lay. With only one door, the building looked to Antony like a death-trap, should a fire ever break out there.

To the left as you entered the building, was a small door that bore the words:

HEAD LIBRARIAN: NO DIRECT ENTRY

An arrow pointed towards another door after which was written: SEE SECRETARIAT. Directly opposite the entrance and close to the door of the Secretariat was the Receptionist's desk, a high structure over which you needed to be very tall to notice the presence of anybody behind it.

Antony walked slowly straight to the reception and tapped the desk to draw the attention of a man whose head he noticed from the door. The man was working on a crossword puzzle and may have reached a crucial point in the game because it took three knocks from Antony to cause him to rise.

"What?" the man inquired with a haggard frown, his index finger stuck between the pages of his crossword puzzle book.

Antony bit his lower lip for a while unable to understand how he had offended the man.

"I would like to see the Head Librarian," he said. The man, probably in his forties and with rapidly greying, scanty hair sighed

and then dragged a large exercise book, opened to a blank page and swinging it round placed it in front of Antony.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he asked.

“Did you not say you want to see the Head Librarian?” the angry man behind the counter asked.

“That’s right.”

“Then how will you see him without signing the Visitors Book? Write your name, qualification and the reasons for seeing him.”

Antony wrote his name as it ought to be: Dr. Nkoaleck. As for the reasons for seeing him, he simply wrote RESEARCH. The book was taken away.

“He will see you,” the crossword man said.

“When?” Antony asked.

“I say he will see you ,” the man said with even more anger. “When the time comes, won’t you know?”

Antony waited for exactly forty minutes, during which time he looked round the place. Between the Head Librarian’s door and the Secretariat was a show case, a cupboard of about a metre and a half high and about the same length in width. There were several new books on display, mainly journals and sports magazines. Antony got attracted to one book: *HOW EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED AFRICA*.

“Can I take a look at that book?” he said to the receptionist.

“Is only for display,” the man said.

“But I can’t even touch it?”

“When people touch it, they dirty it.”

“So how does one get to know and read a book without touching it?”

The man did not answer him. To the right of the receptionist’s counter was a huge long cupboard containing drawers of authors and Title Indices. Antony walked up to the drawers and pulled out the first to see the cards inside.

“You don’t just pull things anyhow like that,” the receptionist bawled from his hide-out.

“Then how do I know he books you have?” Antony queried.

The man walked round and came out to where Antony was standing.

"Was it not you who said you wanted see the Head..."

"Does that stop me from doing anything else?"

"Okay, what book do you want?"

"Do you have *National Geographic Magazine*?" Antony asked with severely suppressed irritation.

"I check," the man said and then walked across to the drawer marked NA - - NU and pulled it. Antony looking over his shoulder noticed the man turn over to NATURE..., repeating to himself:

Natural Geography, Natural Geography..."

"I'll be damned," Antony said to himself. "I said National Geographic Magazine," he told the man, "not NATURAL GEOGRAPHY..."

The man turned with malevolent eyes and stared into Antony's face.

"Okay, we don't have," he said.

The man's stupidity and impatience intrigued Antony as substance for a good story. But he had lost his patience to the point where he needed just one more provocation and he would tell the man off or even slap him.

They were waved by a bell which rang from the office of the Head Librarian. The man went in to answer and when he returned he told Antony to go in.

The Head Librarian's office was in the shape of a triangle with a small window to the left, through which the choking smoke from the man's pipe trickled out. His black leather swivel chair was placed towards the apex of the triangular room with his desk cutting across the centre. It was so large that the man had to squeeze himself against the wall to reach the front of the desk and leave the office.

The man had a large skull and a clean shaven face with low side burns. He had a bald head and a much wrinkled face. There was an expression of hardness on his face which was peculiar to people in high office, people who were used to giving orders rather than discussing issues. A gray moustache ran over his upper lip. His teeth were brown, very likely the result of the pipe that stuck in his mouth. He was wearing a charcoal gray three piece suit which he would have been more comfortable without because he carried a small towel in his left hand with which he mopped the perspiration from his face every few seconds.

"Sit down, doctor," he said in the precise clipped words of a military leader, using his pipe to point at one of three seats on the other side of his desk.

Antony sat down.

"You are Dr. Nkoaleck?" the man asked.

"That's right," Antony admitted.

"You are on a research mission?"

"Not a research mission as such," Antony corrected him. "I just returned from the University and I am looking for a job. I want to carry out research while I work."

"So how do I help you?"

"I did my Masters in Political Science and would like to know what you have by way of research material in that area."

"What was your topic like?"

Antony wrote it out and showed him:

BORN TO LOSE: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF COLONIALISM AND NEOCOLONIALISM ON THE MALAISE OF THE POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICAN POLITICAL SYSTEMS.

The Head of Librarian nodded, smiled to himself and asked:

"Any other degrees?"

Antony shook his head in denial.

"Did you say this was for what kind of Science..."

"P-o-l-i-t-i-c-a-l- S-c-i-e-n-c-e, sir," Antony said with growing indignation.

The man did not lose his cool. He simply told Antony "This title sounds big quite alright for any degree, but you don't have a PhD?"

"No. It is a Masters, which is the same as the Doctorate of the Third Cycles which we have all over the place around here."

The man did not like the equivalence Antony had given to the degrees, even though he himself had only a *Licence*. But he did not think it was his place to dispute it.

"This library operates this way," the man resumed with much less respect than before, "you give the name of the book you want and we go down and bring it to you."

"But what if I don't know the name of the book I want? What if I just want to stroll round and look at shelves in the hope that I might find something interesting?"

The man smiled and told him:

"When a man wants to stroll, he goes to the garden or streets. When he comes to the Library, he comes for something specific. We have lost very many books by allowing loafers into the place."

He reached for a pile of books from a shelf to his left which he placed in front of Antony. He threw open each of the books and showed Antony whole sections that had been ripped

"That is what happens when you allow people in who don't know what they are looking for," he said.

"Bull shit," Antony cursed. "You cannot even see that the pages are ripped off because you do not allow the users sufficient access." He walked out, banging the door.

When Antony left the Head Librarian's office, he knew he would have to change his literary plans since he could not see books. By the time he visited the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, he had lost interest in teaching in the University. From the Library, he went to the University Bookstore. It looked like a newspaper stand. Antony expected to see hundreds of volumes. He saw no real books. There were only "policops" bound duplicated material on various subjects. Put together in the most unacademic manner, this was sold at cut-throat prices to helpless undergraduate students. When he opened one, he noticed that there were no acknowledgements of any sort for material used.

When he showed the Dean his thesis and various subjects of research he hoped to carry out in the University, the man showed very little zeal. He told Antony that real scarcity existed only in the Faculty of Science.

"If it were possible to keep away the political thing in that your degree and use only the Science could be persuaded to look into your case. But as it is, no way."

They next argue over Antony's legality to the title of Doctor. When the man found Antony's arguments irresistible, he told him bluntly:

"In any case, whether you think the Masters is stronger than the *Doctorat* or not, you cannot call yourself a doctor. And even if you

call yourself a doctor, the university will not employ you unless you show proof of teaching experience.”

“So where do I get the experience from?” Antony asked.

The man shrugged and said:

“That’s the rule.”

Antony took a taxi from the University to the Ministry of Education where he carefully deposited his application in the mail office and returned without discussing anything with anybody in the office.

When he returned to Likume, he had made up his mind to document meticulously all the shortcomings he was discovering every day in the society and then immortalise them in fiction.

Chapter Sixteen

Antony mentioned his father's illness and the plans he had for evacuating him for treatment abroad to Eru and his aunt. Eru told him it was impracticable, given his poor financial position. His aunt told him it was unnecessary because the man had long been counted out among the living.

He deposited his application for employment in August. By February the following year, he had not yet been employed. During that time, very much had happened that was to have a profound effect on his life. There was first the problem of joblessness. He was no idler. It was during this period of proud isolation that his long cherished ambition of being a writer began to materialise. He had enough material for his writings to occupy him for many years. But he could not spend his whole life writing. Besides, he needed money.

He lived practically alone in a tiny ill-lit room in his aunt's house. Nobody visited him and he too never felt the urge to visit anybody except his aunt, once in a while. By this time, he had become a member of Pa Godsabi's family.

Beckongncho dropped by once in a long while. On one occasion, he gave Antony I0,000 francs to help him buy a few personal needs. He had to persuade Antony to take because he would not. Beckongncho knew he had no money, but he thought it condescending to accept a dash. When he finally took the money, he called it a loan. Nchindia came more often than Beckongncho but since he would not talk on anything serious Antony advised him to forget about him and take care of his business in Sowa.

The only other person who visited him was Eru. He called whenever he had time. After the emergency meeting in which Anuse had so openly denounced Antony, nobody was anxious to risk his job by persisting on any friendship with him. Anuse did not stop there. The day after the meeting, Bitong and himself drafted a letter

to Chief Fuo-Ndee. In it, as though voicing the honest personal opinions of the tribesmen in Likume, they condemned Antony's conduct. The described him an utter failure of all the hopes of the tribe, a disgrace to the royal line, and an insult to human nature itself.

Knowing Antony's chances of becoming the next Chief, Anuse wanted to put his name out of his father's favour. Anybody who had dared to confront and disgrace him in public did not deserve to wear the crown of the tribe. He took the letter home himself and read and interpreted it to the Chief.

Only two things saved Antony's reputation – the Chief's love for him and the latter's lack of trust in Anuse. These two factors were strengthened by the intervention of Pa Godsabi who was the Chief's play-mate from youth.

According to Eru, these did not matter, and he did much to convince Antony to ignore them. At certain moments, he felt like telling Eru off. But one thing held them together – Antony's declining finances. He had returned home with more than 200,000 francs in the bank. As a student on an INTERAF scholarship, he was paid in American dollars. They then went to Lomé and converted it in the black market into the Ghanaian *Cedis*, at the rate of 10 *Cedis* per dollar. He therefore earned just as much as his lecturers who were paid 200 *Cedis*. He saved very much during the last two years.

From what he had brought into the country, he had sent 50,000 francs to his father at home when it became unnecessary to evacuate him. He had also spent over 50.000 francs on the renovation of his aunt's house.

It was only when he had just about 75.000 francs left and no job in sight yet, that he began to economize. That was too late. Eru saw that he needed money, and so gave it to him as often as he took bribes in the market. At first, Antony was ashamed to accept the offer. But when he saw that he would starve, he condescended. He began by calling the money a loan, and even tried to keep records of every franc that Eru gave him. But within a month, it had almost swollen to 25.000 francs. In the end, he agreed with Eru that unless the amount exceeded 25,000 francs, he should regard it as a gift.

In addition to this generosity, Eru also brought an idea to Antony one day concerning the possibilities of getting a job in a private college in town. He told Antony to apply to one of the several colleges. He told him specifically not to mention that he had applied to the government. If the college knew that, it would not accept him. He must tell them that he was going to remain there forever. As soon as he got his money, and as soon as the government employed him, he could go away.

“Bo Eru, the idea is good. But my conscience will not allow me to do that.”

“Your conscience will not allow you to eat? Your conscience will not allow you to wear fine clothes? Your conscience will not allow you to buy a drink for a visitor”

Antony tried to explain but Eru would not listen. He said:

“Tell that your conscience that you owe people money which you want to pay back, that is why you want to tell a lie to get a job. If the conscience is really your won, then it will not disturb you again.”

Antony still did not yield. Expecting that it would pay to be honest, he went to three schools and told the same honest tale. He got no job. There was in particular, the proprietor of Holy Trinity Secondary School. A tall huge octogenarian. His enormous personality radiated fraud. He did not seem to need a teacher, but he would not say so. He gave applicants the impression that he was anxious to employ them, but that they lacked some vital element.

For instance, while Antony was waiting to go in for interview, he overheard the man complaining that the gentleman who said he had his City and Guilds Certificate did not have Economics.

“If only you had Economics at any level,” he went on, “the job would be yours. I would even have made you the Principal because your knowledge of economics would help in the management of our finances.”

When it was Antony’s turn, nothing was said about Economics. He instead wept that Antony did not include shorthand to his qualifications. A lady who had economics and stenography went in, convinced that the job was already hers. But Afunbalang regretted that she did not have Chemistry. Antony was forced to try what Eru told him on the fourth occasion. There it worked. He got a job from which he earned 40.000 francs a month.

As the days went by, other complications began to develop in his life. He began to feel the urge for company. Ideas for his book were no longer flowing as they used to. And often, when he sat over the manuscripts, he thought not of the story at hand, but of somebody with whom he could converse. When this feeling first began to take root in his mind, the thought of a woman, a wife, never arose. He was simply thinking of somebody to talk to particularly when he was not writing. Gradually the desire began to take a well defined pattern. He thought more of a companion who was not a man because the urges were more disturbing and frequent in the lonely hours of the night – those ungodly hours when none but a homosexual would have appreciated he company of another man.

But he kept the thoughts very strictly to himself. He continued to treat Eru's lascivious life with the utmost disdain. Somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind, a slow fire of envy was burning. Eru, his veritable *Mephistopheles*, would have been more than willing to bring him one girl every night for as long as Antony could afford the stamina.

The doors of the brothels were wide open. So were hundreds of the girls whom he met along the streets every day, free and willing to oblige him. (He had begun to go out more frequently). More than once, he went very near to risking a trip to the brothel under the pretext, if seen there, of saying that he was gathering material for his novel.

One morning, he ran into Eru in the market. He did not know exactly why he had gone there. But he remembered that Eru had often told him stories of women who had seen him on the road and had invited him to go to bed with them. When Eru asked him what he was doing, there he said rather inadvertently:

“Looking for a woman.”

Eru looked very pleasantly surprised.

“Have you seen any?” he asked.

“No,” Antony said.

“Should I help you?”

“Yes.”

“How many do you want? What kind?”

Antony smiled and told him”

I don’t want any woman. I am just joking. I know that’s what you liked to hear.”

“Liar.” Eru shouted. “You really want a woman. It is from the overflow of the heart that the rod rises. Don’t deceive yourself.”

Antony smiled contemptuously. But he knew Eru was right.

Chapter Seventeen

One day Eru paid Antony one of his several surprise visits. “I want us to visit No Man’s Land,” he said. Antony had been working on his manuscripts.

“Where is that, and what for?” Antony asked.

“My oxygen mask,” Eru said. “I want you to meet my DIE.”

Antony knew he was referring to some lady. As a diversion from his work, he agreed to go with him. But he asked Eru to give him about thirty minutes to put away his manuscripts and get ready.

While he was getting ready, Eru was attracted by a transparent document file that lay on the small table in the parlour. There were over seventy pictures of oddities in it, mainly men and women. Above and also below each eccentric picture was a small piece of information.

The first picture was captioned Jo-Jo (from Lagos, Nigeria). He was a tallish male with long dirty grimy hairs in the true *Rastafarian* tradition. Half the hair had been shaven off across the middle of the head, above the ear, such that if you saw him from the front you would think he was bald. The back of the head remained untouched. He was wearing a yellowish-white shirt and a brown neck-tie. Over this, he wore a well-buttoned blue crumpled, double-breasted jacket.

Had the photographer not gone below the lower edge of the coat you would think he was a university professor of some sort. But below the man was completely naked, revealing that he was a patient of elephantiasis of the scrotum. Eru recalled from it and turned to the next: HOSTESS (from Bamenda, Cameroon). It was a female. She was a former Cameroon Airlines Hostess who took to drugs after she had been jilted by a lover. She lost her mind permanently. She was wearing very long hair with the strands of a Medusa’s. She was naked save for a transparent piece of plastic paper she wrapped round her waste. She was carrying a cutlass.

Eru flipped through the entire collection and asked Antony what it was all about.

"I am carrying out research to establish the relationship between urbanization and insanity," he declared.

Eru smiled, flipped through the album and returning to the first few pictures and asked:

"If this woman is mad, why should she be carrying a cutlass?"

"How is that different from a policeman or a soldier in this country carrying a gun?"

"How did you come by so many pictures?" Eru inquired.

"Friends of mine from all over the world send them to me," Antony said. "Bo, Eru," he began seriously. "Do you notice that there is some reason in madness?"

Eru smiled and looked at Antony without saying anything.

"When I see the way mad people go about their things, I think there is much for us to learn..."

"So you have..."

"Let me finish," Antony told him. "When a man walks past a beautiful woman, he does not care, even when he is stark naked. You will not. Your manhood will challenge the statue of liberty..."

"And what do you think is responsible for that?"

"Guilt," Antony says. "We react to it because we feel guilty. The mad man goes about his life unbothered because his hands are clean..."

"Wait, wait, wait," Eru interrupted him, flipping through the pages again. "The album is not complete."

"I know," Antony said. "What makes you so?" I have written to friends from East and Southern Africa to send me pictures of mad people from their urban and rural areas. I know I have to go to places..."

"that is not what I meant," Eru said. "I do not see your own picture here," he said.

Antony gave a sharp brief laugh.

"Instead, it is yours that needed to be there to complete the collection," he said.

"A man has first to be mad to be interested in mad people," he told Antony.

Antony did not answer him.

They took a taxi across town to effect Eru's visit. When they arrived the New Market junction, they got out and walked about twenty-five metres and branched off into a small three room house. A lady Antony seemed to recognise by name rose came to greet them.

"I am very sure I have met this lady before," he said.

"You have," Eru said. "I introduced her to you on the eve of the welcome party. My helicopter, my bread and butter."

I have forgotten," Antony said. "You know how we writers..."

"She is Commy," Eru interrupted him. "Commy is my first wife."

Antony shook her hand and they were led into the house. The visit was not accident as Antony soon noticed. Eru had arranged with Commy to prepare them lunch. It was a very simple home. Two rooms opened into the parlour. The floor was covered with thermoplastic tiles. In the centre of the floor, was a set of solidly made cane chairs, just like those in Eru's house. They were also laid with thin cushions and stood on a central floor mat.

Commy seemed to like flowers which she planted on the veranda, in the parlour, the room and even in the kitchen.

She also took an interest in embroidered material which hung all over the house. Antony noticed the absence of books. She took her album from the cupboard and while Antony went through it, she laid the table for lunch.

Antony drew Eru's attention to the picture of two little boys.

"They really resemble you, you know?"

"But they are my children. Come in they call Eru papa. Antony looked confused.

"But if you are married to her, why do you not live together?"

Commy heard that part of the conversation as she came in from the kitchen.

Ask him, sir. Ask him."

"That's what I am doing. Why do you live so far apart?" Antony asked Eru.

"She snores too much in the night," she countered. "I can't stand snoring."

“He doesn’t sleep at all in the night,” she countered. “I can’t stand a man who won’t sleep.”

“I’d be damned,” Antony exclaimed, and they all laughed.

Eru went on to tell them the story of a birth celebration they attended in which the lady of the house rose to thank the guests.

“Do me one favour,” she begged her husband’s friends. “Look for another woman for your friend. He will kill me... As soon as I return from work, he jumps behind me; as I enter the kitchen, that’s him behind me. If you see our five children, you will think they are twins.... He will kill me.”

Antony smiled at the idea of five children being called twins instead of quintuplets!

The issue of Eru and Commy was much more complicated than snoring and sleeplessness. His sister’s did not like Commy. They did not find her particularly beautiful, and thought she was too old for their brother. They called her a divorcee, even to her hearing. They said Eru was claiming to be the father of another man’s children, that she left her marital home already pregnant.

Out of sympathy, Eru found himself closer to her than any other girl. And so, it happened, that Eru who had all the beautiful girls at his beck and call had to settle for a gargoyle. Perhaps excessive indulgence had dulled the cutting edge of his judgment.

Eru said, they were casual friends when she was in her form three in college. When she completed college, she went into marriage and they never met again until seven years later. She told him how she had been forced into a stormy marriage. Her husband, one policeman, would beat her with a leather belt until she bled. He would bring women into their bedroom and cause the women to insult her. The main cause of the trouble was her childlessness. In his usual comic manner, Eru told her:

“Perhaps that man was barren himself. Give me one minute and I put you twins in that ya stomach.”

“Will it not be a good thing?” she said. She gave Eru just one chance and, true to his word, and to Commy’s greatest joy, she took in.

But almost immediately trouble set in. She had a teaching job with the mission. The mission would not retain a pregnant female teacher unless she showed proof that she was married. Eru did her the second favour by signing that he was the father of her twins, and that he was her husband. It was all a joke, but for all his frivolity, Eru was unable to throw Commy away. Gradually, he began to take his responsibilities seriously as the father of the children. He did not hesitate when Commy brought the birth certificates of the two children for him to sign as their father.

She was the first girl Eru took Antony to visit, the first girl Eru ever introduced as his wife. Commy was very different from the rest of the girls Eru “went out with”. She was not showy in dress and had a much more serious air about her than the rest of them. She behaved more like a married woman than a mere girl friend.

The three held up their glasses and touched them in mid-air. Eru put his too in his mouth and drained its contents in just one gulp. Placing the glass back on the table and striking his breast with his open palm, he sighed:

“Those who have died must be regretting very much now,”

“How do you mean?”

“See what they are missing,” he said pouring himself another drink.

Antony’s eyes met those of Commy and they both smiled.

“Bull shit,” Antony said. Eru flashed a swift look at Antony but he had deliberately turned away and was industriously studying the pictures on the wall. It was then that Eru also noticed an interesting picture. It was a picture of Eru and Commy together.

Eru looked at the wall and saw the picture for the first time. He never took any picture with Commy although she had a few of his photographs. But one day when he visited her, he found an enlarged picture of the two of them. She had given two separate pictures to the photographer who had merged the two and then enlarged them. Eru thought it was wrong for her to have done so, but he did not ask her. He always feared hurting her feelings.

Chapter Eighteen

Antony met Vicky one Sunday morning in church. So far, although he thought so frequently of women and brothels, Vicky was the only girl he had actually conversed with since telling Angela off. Often when his thoughts turned on women, hers was the only face and voice that gave substance to his fantasies. It was not that he had any very special infatuation for her, in spite of the fact that she was by far more beautiful than Angela. He only came to think seriously of her because of his relationship with her father. He was never to forget the comfort he got from the man's words at that moment when the whole tribe had deserted him. Then the more he visited the old man, the more his interest grew in his daughter.

Gradually, the idea of marriage began to enter his consciousness. And whenever it occurred to him, it was only Vicky that he could think of. Once again, it was with the idea of marriage that he was in love, not with Vicky. Vicky's name only came in because there was no other girl he was familiar with. With time, it seemed to him that he was actually in love with her. Her father praised her often to him, and whenever he visited them, she was anxious to serve him.

When they met in church that morning, he conversed with her for some time and then invited her to his place. He told her he would be at home at 8'o'clock that evening.

At precisely 8 o'clock, she came. It was the very first invitation he had given to a girl and he was glad she came. He bought a few bottles of Coca-Cola and some biscuits. These he opened and set on the table in front of them and they began to eat and drink and talk. Then Antony told her why he had invited her and that he would like them to be life partners.

An extremely long silence followed. Then she said: "Then you must have to ask papa, Tony. If he says yes, I will say yes." Antony thought for a while and then inquired:

"But if he says no?"

She did not answer. She had turned away after having answered. In the silence that followed, Antony's question she turned again towards him with a smile which seemed to imply that her father could not refuse. When she rose to go, she took Antony in her arms and said:

"Tony kiss me good night."

Antony was thrilled by his conquest. That whole night and the day before, he went to see her father, he ate, drank and slept only on thoughts about his future with her. He already saw himself as a married man. He saw himself putting Vicky through her G.E.C. Advanced levels, sending her to the university, getting children. It appeared to him that she had sucked out all his sorrows and past fears in the long fervent kiss she had given him.

As he had expected, Vicky's father had no objection whatsoever. Rather, he said:

"My son, I even wonder why it should take so long for you to know a girl that loves you." Then he asked him.

"How many people have you discussed this with?"

"I have discussed it with nobody. There is nobody I respect to the point where I could discuss such an important issue with. Why do you say so father?" "Oh no. Nothing. Only that when it comes to marrying like this, people say this and that. And you really need to be a strong man to make up your mind and...."

"I have made up my mind. I listen to nobody outside this house. They have proved that they are not worth listening to."

He went to see Eru shortly after returning home. He was not going to ask his opinion. He merely wanted to tell him what he had decided. Eru was completely ignorant of the relationship that existed between Antony and Vicky.

"Eru's brows drew together into a knot of concentration for a whole minute before he asked:

"Vicky Godsabi?"

Antony nodded. He was not surprised or even embarrassed that Eru knew her. After all, there was no girl he did not seem to know. But after that answer, Eru followed up with:

“Of course I know her. Who doesn’t know her?” “What does that mean?”

“Is that the best that can be said about a relationship with a girl?”

“Well,” Eru shrugged. “What else is there?”

Antony paused for a while and then asked:

“Do you know much about her?”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“That is still no question. You mean tell you about her what? You don’t know that women have many things men can know and talk about?”

“Her beauty, for instance. How do you find her?”

“Superb,” Eru said holding up a thumb to him the way he usually did when speaking about a beautiful girl. “There are not many like her from this tribe.

Antony smiled proudly.

Eru gave a sudden contemptuous laugh.

“And her conduct?” Antony asked.

“Rotten,” Eru said.

“Nothing or rotten?”

Arr, oo, ti, ti, ee, enn” Eru spelled the word out.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I say rotten. What else do you want me to say? Why do you ask me about her so much?”

“Because I am going to marry her”

“Marry her?”

“Of course.” He was not disturbed by the word Eru had used to described her. He had never trusted Eru’s ability to choose words properly. He had never credited him with any responsible vocabulary.

“You want to marry a girl without digging her? Then how will you know she is good?”

“Eru,” Antony said with a lot of vexation in his voice: “You don’t behave like somebody who has ever seen the four walls of secondary school...”

“But I behave like somebody who has seen the four walls of Likume, the society that you are about to enter with your bookshop in your head.”

“You are not living in this society Eru, don’t deceive yourself. You are living only on the surface...”

“Whether I am in the corner, on the top, or wherever, it is the society. That is better than being outside of it like you. If you have left the seminary, why should the seminary not leave you alone to enjoy the best things in life?”

Antony was not paying attention to Eru’s nonsensical talk. He continued: “In any case, I came to tell you as a friend who has been very helpful to me, that I have at last decided to get married, and that I have found a girl...”

“And that girl is Vicky?”

Antony nodded several times.

“That with the town teeming with girls like this, your eyes can fall only on Vicky?”

Antony nodded several times.

“One man’s meat is another man’s poison,” Eru said.

“I thought you didn’t know that,” Antony responded. Eru shrugged and said:

“Blessed are the piss makers, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. May your souls rest in perfect piss.”

Nchindia came to Likume the following Sunday. Antony was not at home when he went to see him. Thinking that he might have gone to Eru’s place, he decided to go there and find out. There he learnt from Eru for the first time that Antony and Vicky were already engaged, but that the whole tribe disapproved of the marriage. He went away but returned afterwards and the two went to see if Antony had returned. There it was Eru who brought up the topic.

“Bo Antony, your brother does not want to believe that you want to marry Vicky Godsabi.”

“If he doesn’t want to believe, how can I make him believe.”

When Antony eventually confirmed to Nchindia that it was really true, he inquired whether he had asked all their people about it.

"You can't ask all our people on an issue like this," Antony told him. "Beside, they are all blind. They cannot listen to the voice of reason. They cannot be of any help to me."

"True brother. But you know that you are not like any other person..."

"Of course, nobody is like any other person. Talk sense."

Nchindia scratched his head nervously, paused for a while and then said:

"Brother, you know that our father is..."

"I hope that you are not going to talk about the Chieftaincy?"

"I just wanted to say a little about it brother."

"Don't," Antony told him. Nchindia remained silent.

"Bo Antony, let him talk," Eru said. "We are in a democratic country."

Antony smiled beside himself and said:

"Let him talk."

Nchindia did not talk about the throne. He said:

"Brother, my own point is that I don't know why that girl has not yet been married until now."

"The reason is simple," Antony said. "She had not yet seen the right man..."

"Now you have come," Eru said.

"I have come," Antony nodded.

Nchindia was silent for some time and then he said rather unsurely: "I think there are very many people who wanted to marry her..."

But she refused?" Antony cut in.

Nchindia hesitated and then said:

"Yes." That was not what he wanted to say. But he was forced to say it because it looked as if that was what Antony wanted to hear. Then he added: "And the father too is a bad man. He has *monyongo*. He uses *monyongo* for money. He sells his people for money..."

Who told you?"

"That's what they say/"

"They who? Show me somebody who has seen him doing that. People keep talking of *monyongo*. I do not believe in superstition. Give me tangible proofs. Give me reasons that are open to empirical verification..."

“Nobody can, Master Antony,” Eru said.

“Then don’t talk about it.”

“But, brother, the main thing I want to say is that when people here do not like it, papa at home will not like it too...”

“And if he doesn’t like it?”

“He will not bless your marriage. When I was marrying Angelina, we went home and they made a big sacrifice. They blessed us. Till now, I have never quarrelled with her. And we now have two children.”

Antony called this the height of ignorance of the logic of human existence. He told them:

“The passing of the sperm into the uterus where it fuses with the ovum to produce an offspring has just nothing to do whatsoever with what people say or don’t say when you are about to get married. If you are happily married now, it is because you met the right girl for yourself. I have met one for myself. My convictions are my blessings.”

Chapter Nineteen

Any *opposition* from anybody concerning Antony's marriage to Vicky only wet to emphasize how right he was in his decision. In fact, anything with which his people disagreed came to be the best thing for him to do. It was not that he knew they were right and deliberately decided to contradict them. His opinion of everybody else except Pa Godsabi was extremely inconsequential.

Like Antony, Pa Godsabi did not care about what the rest of the world was saying about the engagement he had so carefully worked out. People had been insulting him for years. But he knew that the marriage of his long-neglected daughter to their first and only graduate was a milestone towards his rehabilitation in public esteem. He had everything to gain. His son-in-law would be able to pay a very large dowry, and he would also be able to turn to him at any time the need arose, for financial assistance. And that was not all. His son-in-law was also to become their Paramount Chief. And of the advantages that went with the crown, he was at pains to explain to Antony.

"When you are Paramount Chief, you will be a god. You will have property, Money, etc. If Fuo-Ndee wanted to buy this town, he could have done it because of property. And the government will pay you 50.000 francs a month... Then for all these things, you have been talking about Anuse and Bitong and the rest. When you are Chief, all that will end. All, because we only see things as the Chief sees them... Fuo-Ndee has been my personal friend from when we were still children. When an ordinary man flatulates, people hold up their noses and complain. When a Chief flatulates, everybody claps! Nkoaleck, I don't know whether that means anything to you."

"It certainly does, father." Antony had never shown any interest in the crown at all. But each time, he sat with the old man, it looked more and more attractive.

“Good,” the man went on. “So if you are anxious that he should still look at you as the good child that you have always been, different from what Anuses keeps saying, I can do it. To go to Small Monje and talk to him like one good friend to another, and make him listen to me and believe me, that is not lie licking my elbow.”

Antony knew that his father did not bear him any grudge. He had been home to see him on his return. But with Anuse and Bitong teaming against him and sending delegations every day to complain against him, there was always the possibility for his father to doubt some of the defence he had made. He was very grateful to the old man for the offer to go and defend him and encouraged him to do it.

Eventually, the trip was made to see the Chief. Vicky went with them. As Godsabi had promised, he spoke so strongly in defence of Antony that the Chief gave them his blessings for marriage. This was the same as saying that the traditional obligations of the marriage had been fulfilled. And once a Chief blessed the marriage of his son in the presence of the father of the bride-to-be, the couple was free to live together as husband and wife. So as far as the tradition went, Vicky and Antony did not require any further ceremony to be called husband and wife.

But Antony found the developments a little disconcerting. When he agreed that her people should go home and see his father, it was not to ask him to bless their marriage. He knew he would marry Vicky, but it was not to happen so soon. He had not wanted to get married to her officially without being assured of a job with the government. He thought the old man had made him act rather prematurely, that he had been tricked.

That very month, the old man suggested to him that it would be more respectable for him as a married man to rent a small house up town, and not live with his wife in his own mother's house. Antony saw this as just another way of telling him that Vicky was soon to pack and come to live with him.

“My mother's house is my house,” he tried in vain to convince the old man. “I have put in so much to bring it up-to-date.”

And indeed, he had already done very much to make the place fairly comfortable for himself. He had already changed the roof to zinc, widened the window in his room and inserted a protector of iron rods, roofed the latrine and installed a box in the latrine, such that instead of squatting, one could sit as comfortably as though it were the European type of toilet seat. He had also cemented the floor of the parlour and his own room.

But when Vicky herself suggested it to him several times, he was forced to yield. He was still teaching in the private college in town. But with all the mounting changes in his life, he was forced to rely more and more on Eru for help.

They moved into a two bedroom house where they paid 8.000 francs rents. It was not a lot of money, but it pained Antony because he thought that the money could have served some other useful purpose if they had continued to live in his aunt's house although the new house had the advantage of privacy. Besides, the environment was much quieter for his studies and writings. The windows were also larger and all the rooms cemented. It was not self-contained but a pit latrine was attached to the back part of the building such that one could leave the house, go there and return under the same roof.

There was much more to exasperate Antony. As soon as they moved into their new house, Vicky suggested to Antony that they should start thinking of a church wedding which should take place when she shall have finished school in July. She made the suggestion in April. It was the tragedy of their relationship that Antony found it always impossible to say no to whatever she or her father said. He was so new in the relationship between man and woman that he always thought any slight objection would hurt it. Vicky detected this sensitivity very early in their dealings and so set out to exploit it to the fullest advantage for her and her father. Especially the latter. A date was fixed for July. He then decided to write to Beckongncho.

Dear Kevin,

You must have heard or you will be hearing for the first time that I am fully engaged (married in the traditional sense) to Vicky, the daughter of Pa Godsabi here in Likume. He is, I think, too familiar to you to require any additional information.

Our people did not seem to quite agree. But it is no setback at all. In fact, there is so much they still have to learn from us, especially when it concerns unity and their own welfare. All they say is that Pa Godsabi does not agree with my uncle Mr. Anuse. But it is precisely for this reason that I have decided to marry from that family. That way, the two families will be forced to come together. As I said in my foreword, "in unity lies our salvation: in dissension our doom." The Biongong are too small a people to continue to hate each other. Thank God, my father understands these things. He gave us his blessings.

If you don't mind it, Kevin, can you do Vicky and myself the honour of being our best man for the wedding? It comes up on Saturday 29 July. It is a mere suggestion, and let it not bother you if for one reason or the other you think you can't make it. I know how busy you must be with your school work. But whatever the case, do let us know.

*Yours Sincerely
Antony.*

When he read the letter over and over again, he felt that there was something wrong with it. He was not happy with what he said about unity because his complete withdrawal from the society of their tribesmen was not a sign of unity. But he decided that it was not his fault. His original intentions were good. It was only because he was misunderstood that relations with his people broke down. They had themselves entirely to blame for the way he treated them. He imagined that Beckongncho would know what he meant.

After writing to Beckongncho, he decided on his own to obtain a legal document from the court to indicate that he was already married. He had already compiled a new set of dossiers for employment which he had sent again to Tetseale. He was now convinced that the first ones might have been lost in transit, that is probably why he had not been employed. He thought that since he had already been made to commit himself to that extent in marriage, it would be wise for the government to know when considering his application that he was a married man.

But for some incomprehensible reason, Pa Godsabi did not like Antony's suggestion about court document. In fact, when he first mentioned it, the man asked him a question which made him a bit suspicious and embarrassed.

“Why do you want the court to give you a certificate? You think I will take money from you and go and give my daughter to another man? I am not the kind of man to do such a thing.”

Then about a week after the court certificate was obtained, the old man sent for him and made a proposal which completely shook Antony's confidence in him. He said:

“My son, I have sent for you to tell you what you must do to bind yourself to your wife for life. Now that everything had been done, and Vicky is now your wife in your house, you should do something about her school fees. Her fees for the whole year are only 55.000 francs.”

“I had already borrowed from somebody and paid 40.000 francs. I want you to try and get some money so that we pay the man back, and then try to finish the small one that is left.”

“That I should pay for her fees, pa?”

“Yes, my son. Pay it. And I will want to tell you why you should do it. It is for your own good...”

“Pa but I have no money. You know how much I spent already. The dowry, the trip to see my father which I financed and things of the sort...”

“I know what I am saying,” the old man interrupted him. “When you are to remain happily with a woman, always let her know that she owes you a great debt. Let her always think of it that it not because of you, she might not have got something. Unless there is that, you cannot be the master of the house. That is why I say you should pay that money.”

“I know you have not started working. But it should not be a big problem. You have friends who know how much you will be earning when you begin work. They will not hesitate to give you even one million if you tell them that it was to pay your wife's fees.”

The following day Antony went to Eru and, by way of asking for a loan, he explained what had transpired between him and the old man. When he finished talking Eru said:

“Bo Antony, when you just came, you know where I say you?”

“No,” Antony said. He did not know what he meant. Antony was silent.

“Now you are right down there,” he pointed to the sole of his shoe.

Antony remained silent. He felt ashamed of himself. He knew that there was an element of truth in what Eru had said. He knew that he was not the same rigidly principled man he was when he first arrived Likume, especially now that he was already married. And although it did not quite disturb him, he was not loved and respected any more. In fact, he was detested by his people, and the fact that he continued to lay all the blame on them did not soften their hearts towards him.

“What do you mean, bo, Eru?” he queried.

“I mean that you grow smaller and smaller every day, in my eyes.”

Antony surveyed himself up and down and then said:

“That still doesn’t make much sense to me. How does it fit into what I have just said?”

“Of course, it fits. It fits because a great man with a great philosophy as you have been singing in my ears, would have waited to marry a ready-made girl. I have never recommended Vicky to you, nor has anybody else. But since you loved her and have gone so far, I can do nothing. But, you should have told him: “Look here father-in-law, be a man of your words. When I first mentioned the marriage to you and talked of money, you said she is still in school, so it will not disturb me. I still haven’t got any work. If you cannot wait until I finish, then you leave it. I have no money.

“Then you disgrace yourself before your wife and her father. Then you lose the girl...”

“Shit. Lose which girl? Antony asked. I thought you had a better reason for hurrying to get the court certificate.” Eru inquired. Antony was silent.

“Or was he fearing that he will die and go without chopping your money?”

Antony was silent.

“For things like this, you must think thrice. Four times even, before you say yes.”

“I have not said yes , yet .”

“But you have not said no to him”

“I have not.”

“ So he knows that you agreed

Antony was silent.

“Look at this stupid car which I have spent all my money repairing yesterday .See how it is behaving with me now. Have you never heard people say that about cars?”

Antony smiled and said he had.

“Then you think you will never say that about a girl whose fees you have paid?”

Antony shrugged and said:

“What I need, bo, Eru is the money. Not advice. I have advised myself enough on the matter.”

“I have not refused to lend you all the money you want. After all, who am I to refuse to give a big man like you ropes to tie himself?”

Chapter Twenty

Antony *had* walked into a bee-hive by marrying from the Godsabi family, for his problems with Godsabi multiplied with each passing day. The wedding had been originally planned for the end of the month of July when Vicky shall have finished her G.C.E examinations. He was beginning to have the feeling that he had not made the best choice in the world by marrying into that particular family. But he decided to put up a fine face on it. Besides he was ashamed to admit to Eru that he had judged wrongly. That would have meant confessing that Eru and Nchindia and everybody else who had objected were right and he wrong. He hoped to try to change things without alarming anybody.

One month before the actual date of the wedding, he went to Eru with another problem concerning money. He wanted a loan of over I00,000 francs to enable him to finance his wedding.

“Did you not say that you are just going to make a small low-key marriage for only about 25,000 francs or less?”

“I did, bo, Eru. But I had to reconsider the matter. I have now decided that I need to marry in grand style.”

“Is that you idea or your fiancée’s ? You know how women can make men do terrible things!”

“Mine idea,” Antony said unhesitatingly. That was a lie. It was entirely Vicky’s idea. He had talked about the kind of marriage he would like long before Vicky came up with the idea that they should have a church wedding at the time she had suggested. He had told Eru without even consulting Vicky. He had assumed that she would take whatever he decided for them.

When Vicky asked him afterwards how it was going to be celebrated he told her that the mass would take place in the private chapel of the parish priest. After the mass they would retire with some ten or fifteen friends and relatives to the house and share a case of beer and some coke. As for the dress it would be as simple as possible, a jumpa for him and a gown for her.

Vicky looked extremely scandalized. She told him:

"Tony, you don't know the kind of girl I really am. I am a very proud girl and I never want to let myself down. I have attended weddings of hundreds of my best friends. They are still in Likume here. And all the weddings took place in the Cathedral and the Town Hall. What are they going to think about me as their friend if they hear that I wedded in a secret corner in this same Likume? Put yourself in my place Tony."

"I do not see how or why we should hide at all. I am not ashamed to marry you. Perhaps you are ashamed to marry me, that's why you don't want people to see it..."

"For God's sake, Vicky," Antony told her, "I am not the kind of man to think so of you. I am proud of you."

"O.K. then why should we hide? I need to pay all my friends back. I must have to invite them too, to come and hold the edges of my wedding gown. My father has an orchestra that has been playing for the weddings of others. Why not my own? I need a wedding gown. You need a suit too, a black one. All this simple dressing you have been talking about, it does not sound good in my ears. They will only disgrace us. You are a graduate. You should do your things with prestige. We need to get a photographer to come and take coloured pictures..."

Eru did not refuse to give him the loan. But this time, he attached a condition:

"Today, bo Antony, my money will not go for nothing. If this wedding is going to be grand, that means there are going to be very many beautiful girls present. If very many beautiful girls will be present, and you want me to give you my money, then you must make it in such a way that I too gain something from the show."

"I will be ready to make you gain from it bo, Eru. You can imagine how many beautiful friends Vicky has."

"You have hit the nail on the head with a hammer," Eru told him very cheerfully. "Make me the M.C for the show. Let me be the best man. In that case I will be in the best position to torch them all. Who knows if I shall not even finally get my own real wife from that? That is the only interest I am asking for the loan."

Antony looked across at him, reflected for a few disturbing moments and then begged:

“Bo Erum ask for something else,”

“What are you calling something else? A cat has asked for a mouse and you want it to ask for something else?”

“Yes, bo Eru, ask for something else.”

“Why?”

“Because I have already committed myself.”

“I hope you don’t want to say you have been digging all Vicky’s friends?”

“It is more serious than that. I had already written to Beckongncho to invite him to come and do that for us. And you know he is a man of great respect. That is why I said so.”

“Then why do you come to me? Go back to Kevin for the loan. If London is to drink, then it should be London to get drunk. Not Jerusalem.”

Antony sat motionless for a whole minute.

“Bo Eru, I beg you to reason with me.”

“How can you be begging? You are asking for a loan of hundreds of thousands from me. You know how much I have given you already. No interest. Now I ask only a small opportunity to gain too from my money. You say I should reason with you because you have asked a man of respect to be your best man. Maybe you think I am an idiot.”

“I cannot say you are an idiot, bo Eru. You are a perfectly reasonable and kind man. What do you think Kevin will say or think about me?”

“If you know what to tell him, he will say nothing that you may be thinking about. What can he even say? Take the same pen that you used to write to him again and say you have decided that he will be too busy. Tell him that the wedding will now be too small for him to need to waste his time and come down. I don’t see how he will insist and come there. If you cannot do me that favour too, then I will also suggest that you should ask for something else, not money. You will not get even one white franc from me if you refuse me that.”

Chapter Twenty-One

E*ru stood* by his decision. Antony, on his part, could not withdraw the promise he had made to Vicky. He wrote to Beckongncho cancelling the invitation along lines suggested by Eru.

The very day that Beckongncho got the letter he left Sowa for Likume. There he told Antony:

“I have decided to come right here myself instead of writing, just to let you know that it is not asking for too much to want me to officially during your wedding ceremony. If I could come right here only to ask you to right an article for our magazine, I don’t think I could suddenly become too busy to render you such an important service.”

Antony looked sadly determined to keep him out of the job. He apologised that he had to disturb his cousin to that extent.

“So who is going to do it in my place?” Beckongncho asked worriedly.

“A friend of mine. You know him. Eru.”

“E – R – U?” Beckongncho gaped in shocked disapproval.

“Yes, Kevin,” he said and tried to explain: “You see, it’s not going to be anything fantastic. Just a handful of people. Nothing great.”

“Anyway even if you were only to do his thing with your wife and a third person, that third person ought NOT to be Eru at all. It does not help your reputation among our people who seem to be talking so unfavourably about you. I am sorry, but I think you will be selling yourself at a very low price if you have him run the event.

Antony showed no inclination to change his mind, or give a very convincing explanation. It was after Beckongncho had gone away that he blamed himself for not telling him precisely why he was so bound to Eru. He, however, decided that he would explain it to him at future date. But Beckongncho had left with a disappointment in his heart which no explanation from Antony was ever to efface.

Saturday July 29 was the long-awaited day. Eru was the best man. To many people it came as an astonishment. To all those who had long lost confidence in Antony, the news was received with a morose shrug. It was like saying a notorious robber had stolen a chicken from a farm. Surprisingly, it was Eru's presence that made the day success.

The wedding occasion was memorable for several reasons that rained only in the hearts like Eru who had a flair for the grotesque. In the first place, the march to the table (the event had taken place in the open air) was interrupted by a cock chasing a hen. It eventually caught up with the hen, sprang on to it and performed its ritual. The sight was watched by everybody and many had hoped that Eru had missed it. He had not.

In his very next announcement, Eru said to the newlyweds:

"If you two were doubting what this ceremony was all about, the birds of the air have shown you the way."

Many people did not like his mentioning it, but that was Eru! The Second was the fact that Antony pushed away the photographer. The man would bring the camera so close to his face that you would think it needed Antony's breath to operate it.

Antony and Vicky had not agreed as to whether the item of Gifts should be divulged as a major item on the programme. Vicky had insisted so vehemently that Antony had to include it.

"Gifts," Eru announced when the moment arrived. "Any friends wey dem get eny thing for give the newlywed couple, make them stand for line."

"Anybody with the gift like cows and elephants should go this way to the back because there is not more room the other way." He was pointing to the backyard.

There were only a handful of gifts. There were no animals. Mama Kata brought a tin of termites which she insisted on giving to the couple personally. Two family friends had sent two food flasks. Before meals somebody suggested the Eru should tell a joke.

Eru refused to crack a joke because he was warned that it should not have anything to do with women or sex.

"Then it will be no joke," Eru said. "How can you tell a joke that has nothing to do with sex or a woman?"

But the day passed without incident.

The mass took place in the morning in the Likume Cathedral. Then the people retired to prepare for the big event-feasting and dancing in the old man's premises in the evening. The old man's orchestra played. The attendance was surprisingly high. Chief Fuo-Ndee had sent a messenger to persuade the tribesmen in Likume to ignore all that was being said about Antony and make the wedding a great success. Anuse and Bitong were, however, not present. But nobody wondered. Most of the people who swelled the attendance were those who saw in the occasion the rare opportunity in their lives to drink the old man's cup of wine, free. He had never been known to give anybody anything for nothing. It was even being said that whenever he loved a man, the man could be sure that he was being cheated.

They drank and danced all night.

Antony told Vicky during the wedding that they would go on a honeymoon the following day.

"Moon?" she asked. "For what?"

"Honeymoon," he repeated.

"It is how?" she asked.

"Just a place where we can go and be by ourselves for about a week or so. There we sit down evaluate our expenses, plan our future and things of the sort..."

She did not object. She only wanted to know where that would be.

"Mulyoka," he said.

The decision to go on a honeymoon was not an unnecessary expense as his detractors described it. It was not a thoughtless act as Eru called it. Throughout the month leading up to the wedding Antony had been under tremendous pressure from Vicky, her parents, and Antony's own relatives and friends. Now that the event had finally come to pass he needed some time to review his past, present and future as a married man. He needed to do so in neutral environment.

Situated at about thirty kilometres from Likume, Mulyoka was a small city less than 20,000 people. The only reason it was known was because it lay on the highway from Likume to the other big towns of the South West. *Heart of Life* into which they checked was only one of two hotels in the small town. Its guests were usually travellers who had run into problems with their vehicles for traders on their way to countryside markets.

Other than those the management made money mainly from "Rest," which meant admitting men with their girl-friends or paramours for a small fee of 1000 francs for a period not exceeding one hour.

Thus when Antony told them that he had come to spend three days there the people were very surprised. After he had paid 3,000 francs for the first night they had to wait for about half an hour for a room to be prepared for them. When they arrived all the six rooms of the hotel were occupied and Antony actually saw a hand-in-hand, leave the room that was eventually prepared for them.

It was exactly nine months since Antony had known Vicky, and six since they got engaged. Before they began living together, he had invited her several times for a drink at the Senior Service Club. He had even hired a room there on one occasion where he had a lengthy discussion with her. There he had kissed her several times. But he had deliberately refrained from asking to make love to her.

He somehow convinced himself that she might never have had such an experience before. What strengthened this belief was the fact that when she showed him her photo album he never saw the picture of any male in it who was not related to her. And when he remarked that she did not have pictures of boys, she smiled and said:

"I fear them too much."

Since he knew that they were going to get married, he was reluctant to put a suggestion to her which he thought might hurt her and so lower his image before her. As far as sexual intercourse went therefore, they were complete strangers to each other.

Although he had never really shown any interest in them, Eru's endless lectures about women and sex had taught Antony a lot of things about both. One day, for instance, Eru had carefully explained how a man could impress a woman with whom he was having sex for the first time. He said the only way to win such a woman's heart was for the man to have about five orgasms before the woman had her first. As usual, Antony had tried to show him how stupid he was by pointing out that, scientifically, it did not lie in any man's power to sustain his orgasm.

"Science only talks," Eru told him. "It does not dig girls." He then went on to tell Antony that it can be achieved if the man ate some three or four "bitter kolas." That, he said, was the way he had come to win so much respect with women. Sometime after that, when Antony visited him he showed him a small sack of nuts which he usually bought and stored for his private use.

Antony called him a "good for nothing" boy. But the idea of the nuts was never to leave his mind. And some days before his wedding he had managed to acquire a good quantity of the nuts. That morning he actually made a meal of them.

Another thing he brought with him to the honeymoon was small bottle of Vaseline. This too he learned from a conversation with Eru. He had once said that Vaseline was the best lubricant for use in disvirgining a girl. He had then gone on to explain in shuddering detail:

"If you rut it round your rod and inside her business, even if she is only five year old, she will not know when you are going in."

After the room had been allocated to them and their things taken in Antony withdrew to the balcony and stood looking at them. *Heart of Life* was built on the crest of a small hill, such that one could see much of the small town from the window of any of the rooms. Vicky lay down for a few minutes and then woke up and went out to meet out to meet him. They conversed on the balcony for a long time until Antony told her that they should back to their room. There, after a very long internal deliberation, Antony said shyly:

“Why don’t we have some fun, Vicky? Are we children? We are married couple.”

Vicky responded to the suggestion as though it was the best word to come out of his mouth ever since she saw at her father’s veranda. He then turned his back to take off his coat. He hung it on a hanger on the wall and started to undo the zip of his trousers. But by the time he turned again to look at her, she had already taken off everything and was standing stark naked by the bed.

Under her armpit she was clutching a napkin. A handbag was hanging over her left shoulder. It was slightly open, and he could see that it contained some more napkins. Antony was mesmerized by the sheer beauty of her body. He looked her up and down and swallowed his spittle with a feeling of conquest. She looked very beautiful, more beautiful than she had ever looked to him.

A little nervous thrill ran through his veins and he had to really hurry up because it appeared that she had begun to shiver from sheer anxiety. After he had taken off his shirt and stockings, he went to his handbag and smuggled out his bottle of Vaseline. Then he dived under the blanket to take off his pant. He had barely taken out one leg from the pant when Vicky invaded him.

The feel of her flesh against his was electrifying. He could feel her, warm and soft up against him, her breathing, her heart and his thumping together. She dug her fingers into his ears and brought Antony’s mouth once against hers. Then she began to kiss or rather manipulate the tongues as the two bodies now one, writhed in a frenzied turmoil of pleasure and passion. The two hearts beating vigorously against each other, seemed to merge and become one in the excitement that followed. It was almost animalistic, nothing like anything Antony had even remotely imagined.

Vicky had an astonishing control over every single touch that can rouse and intensify sexual desire in even the coldest of men. First she deftly ran the back of her hand over Antony’s very hairy chest, in such a manner that it barely brushed the tip of every single strand of hair.

Antony wriggled with excitement as if her manipulations had suddenly ignited a smothered flame deep inside him. She smiled and began pecking at his breast with the other hand. Simultaneously she had started lowering her mouth towards Antony’s.

As soon as the two mouths met, Antony was suddenly conscious of a series of fluttering movements at the tip of his tongue which drove a thrill of wild excitement through his whole body. As the Biongong would say *"the iroko tree had fallen in front of the house of a man who had never learned to make mortars."*

Antony had no sex life in the true sense of the expression. Only two events stood in his mind: once in the high school after the Empire Day celebrations when his school had won three shields he followed a group of friends into a brothel where they gave the little money that had been given to them to spend on the occasion to an old harlot who lay there reading a newspaper while they mounted on her and descended without her seeming to notice it. When it was Antony's turn she had asked:

"Wana pledy?"

He had said they were three.

"Afi you finish," she had said disinterestedly, puffing at her cigarette, "call ya brada-eh."

After he had finished Antony had called in his friend.

The second incident happened years afterwards when he, again in the company of other friends visited a woman to whom they each gave 100 francs. When it came to Antony's turn the woman had taken his organ in her hands, weighed it and told:

"Dis nobi blakot for wan hundred. You moss mua two hundred." While he sat pleading, the woman had fondled him until he had ejaculated into her hands and actually left without doing much. The rest of his sex life was a series of masturbatory activities which started in the seminary and continued into the university. Vicky was thus the first woman he could be said to have really gone to bed with.

She had been closing her eyes all this while. Now, as if rising from a deep sleep or an unconscious, she stretched, opening the eyes. Seeing Antony looking at her, she put her hands over her face

as if too shy and ashamed to look directly into the face of a man who had forced her to do such a thing for the first time. But that feigned shyness would not last. Her natural instinct to the contrary was too overwhelming. Withdrawing her hands from her eyes she began to smile. And then, pulling at the hair on his chest she growled:

“Tonnnnyy! You wanted to kill me?”

Antony was in no mood to talk. He felt too upset and irritated to afford even a momentary smile with which to flatter her. His mind blazed with the most heart-rending thoughts of the only past which he thought was possible in such a woman's life. An argument suddenly took root in his mind which he decided to believe was the only thing worth thinking about. He was by himself incapable of arousing any sexual excitement in her. He could never satisfy her voracious sexual appetite! That was why she had to invoke those millions of sexual experiences of her notorious past, to believe that she was lying with a man. That was an insult to his whole sense of worth a firm warning of the kind of life that awaited their future as a married couple. That was sad enough.

It was not impossible for a man to guess from one or two stray and involuntary acts on the part of the woman that she must certainly have had sexual intercourse before. After all, some men are so good at wooing women that even the most chaste fall prey to their wiles, if only once. But even suspicions of this nature are not very inspiring things to be borne by a husband. But if a woman has slept before, she could always pretend. At least a certain measure of pretence was necessary to heighten the man's pleasure in the act.

Therefore, a woman who finds it hard to pretend that she was new in the act to the shattering extent that Vicky had manifested is one of two types – either she is too steeped in harlotry to be cautious or is by nature recklessly indiscreet. Neither of these is a quality he would honestly appreciate in any woman he would like to call his wife. Vicky had both. She was an outright harlot. There was no reason to doubt that one of those days she would call the name of some other man on his bed, thinking that she was with him. There was no reason to doubt that Eru or any of the hundreds of people who had tried to discourage him from marrying her had slept with her.

Thirty minutes afterwards when Vicky seemed to recover from her trance she saw Antony standing by the window and looking out into the street below. He was already wearing his pant. He seemed

to undergo a crisis of feeling that turned his mind into gall instantly. She rose and came up naked and leaned on him, clasping her hands over his hairy chest. Antony did not respond. He turned, gave her a cold stern look and looked back into the street. He then unclasped her hands and told her:

“Don’t Vicky,” she said harshly. “Don’t touch me.”

She let him alone. But for the first time she saw a dismal gloom that had suddenly come over his usually livid face. She went and sat on the bed for a while and then returned to play tricks on him. She tried to tickle him. He did not wriggle. The more she tried the more unresponsive and cold he became. The pedestal of purity, innocence and beauty to which he had once raised Vicky in snoring the judgement of the rest of the world, became a nadir beyond which no human sexual depravity could ever sink.

A malicious thought entered his mind and he shook his head briskly and returned to sit on the bed. After decades of self-deprivation Antony had emptied gallons of his manhood into what now seemed a bottomless well. He felt like easing the burden on his soul by telling her exactly what he thought was necessary for her to be told under the circumstances. But then, she turned, looking even more miserable and asked in the most innocent tone:

“Tony what is wrong? What are you doing like that?”

A very long drawn sigh escaped from his lips, but he seemed incapable of answering. The words with which he had hoped to put her in her right place stuck in his throat. In addition, in spite of the supreme power of the “bitter kola” he had the old sensation that he was losing his potency. His organ had shrunken completely and had become so cold that it did not seem to be part of his body at all. Vicky too, looked disappointed. The more so because her efforts only seemed to worsen matters.

Antony could feel a wall of stone, building itself by degrees between him and Vicky, separating the two hearts. “Till death do ye part”, he recalled the priest’s words to them at the altar the day before. He stared into the ceiling for a very long time and then made a hypocritical sign of the cross with his right hand.

The following day things did not improve. Antony's organ had become a mere stump.

"Don't mind Tony," Vicky tried to cheer him up. "Things like this happen to men," she told him. This only served to fan the flames of his anger. "It will be fine again." She went on. "Just keep cool."

Even on the second day it refused to rise.

Early on the third day, Antony was already packing up his things to return when he heard this radio message:

"Mr. Antony Nkoaleck, currently holidaying at Mulyoka with his wife is urgently requested to report back in Likume as soon as he gets this message. The father of his wife, Mr. Godsabi Ngangnkwebre is extremely sick and wants to talk to both of them.

Vicky was still in the bathroom when the announcement was made. When she came out he told her:

"Vicky, we must go back home right away."

Vicky looked disappointed. She asked him:

"Why Tony? So soon?"

"Yes. I have changed my mind. Nothing is going fine. Besides, your father is very sick too. The radio has just announced that."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Antony and Vicky came too late. Pa Godsabi died an hour before they arrived. A crowd had gathered in his compound, but not to mourn for him. It was being said that the man had died in his latrine while trying to force a bundle of an undisclosed sum of money into the pit.

Antony listened with disbelief. He went into the house and found the bundle of money on the table with the old man's relatives arguing vehemently on how it was to be shared out. There were 500 franc notes, 1,000 and 10,000 franc notes.

Another group of relatives was struggling to take Vicky away from the painful sight. She was screaming and tearing her clothes in uncontrollable grief. Antony looked briefly at her, turned his face away and moved up to a pillar near the back door and leaned against it.

Just then, the leader of the band stepped forward and complained: "You people should know that he did not pay us for four months, when you are checking like that, note it."

One of Vicky's uncles looked at him over his shoulder for a long time and, suppressing the temptation to insult him asked:

"Where is your receipt to show that he did not pay you for four months."

Pa Godsabi Ngang-nkwebre received a burial out of all proportion to the glaring unpopularity he had courted for himself during his lifetime. His orchestra played "entrance free" for seven consecutive nights. The bars in the entire neighbourhood had to close down for weeks because all the drinks in them had been bought to entertain mourners. But though this was most unusual for that family, it was not totally surprising. Not a franc of all the money squandered was contributed by any mourners. It was all the money the deceased had left behind.

Believing that nobody would ever have access to his money which he always hid under his pillow, Pa Godsabi had not bothered about a will. Even before he was buried, relatives exchanged blows. His half brother lost one eye, and Vicky's maternal uncle lost the whole front row of his teeth. In the end, it was agreed that the only way to prevent further bloodshed and perhaps loss of life was to spend all the money to mourn for him. A committee of family members was formed immediately to supervise and ensure that every franc was spent. And it was.

Antony made up his mind not to take part in the festivities that followed the funeral. He had barely managed to go through the burial. Thereafter he remained indoors. He refused to touch his hair with a blade as the tradition of mourning required, and also decided that he would not wear any black clothes. He made no effort to comfort Vicky as a husband would to a wife who had just lost her father.

All the respect he had ever had for the Godsabi family turned into an uncompromising repulsion. The old man's behaviour hurt him very much. He had known that he was going to die. But he had deliberately refused to think of his one and only daughter, her jobless husband and starving relatives and friends whose lives could have been lot better with just a legacy of a few thousand francs. He had chosen to stack up what he had wrung from the toil and penury of others, and dump into a latrine at his death!

What ached him the most was the fact that this was the same man who complained of poverty to him at the slightest opportunity; the same man who had compelled him with his specious logic to pay his worthless daughter's fee. And he had not only demeaned himself by going in for loans but had lost the respect, love and friendship of such an illustrious gentleman as Beckongncho. He shook his head and cursed the man in his fancy.

In the wake of this bitterness rumours began to filter into his willing ears. One version had it that the old man had used charms to draw Antony into his family. They said there was not a new-comer in Likume whom he had not invited in an effort to make him develop an interest in his daughter whom he knew none but a stranger to the secrets of her life could desire for a wife.

Others still said that it was the old man who had encouraged Vicky to insist on a grand marriage so that his orchestra would play for money at the dance. Antony learned that although the old man agreed with him that entrance into the dance should be free to the public, people from his family had been stationed at strategic angles around the compound to collect a small fee.

On the issue of his death and the circumstances surrounding it, a notorious account had it that he had been killed by the “Monyongo” because he had no more close relatives to sacrifice. His refusal too to be taken to hospital was said to be a confirmation of his attachment to the “Monyongo”. Such people were usually forbidden by the laws of the cult, to submit to any treatment with the white man’s medicine.

In times past Antony would have dismissed such rumours as superstitious, as *devoid of empirical verification*. Now he believed even that the carriers of the rumours themselves were unsure about.

Vicky was completely submerged in grief over the death of her father, and Antony remained overwhelmed and paralysed with rage and bitterness. The more so because the situation was now making him lose faith in the strength of his once so powerful convictions. The couple spent the three days following the burial of Pa Godsabi in virtual seclusion. Sometimes, not a word would pass between them for a whole day. But although sometimes Vicky was anxious to talk to him, he never seemed to be in any mood to answer her. She could not stretch her imagination too far because she still knew how friendly Antony had been with the dead man. Like many outsiders, she took it that it was his own way of expressing grief for the dead.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Four days after the burial of Pa Godsabi Antony was still acutely haunted by a fear that he would become impotent. Since the shrinking in Mulyoka, his manhood had still shown no signs of any improvement.

For the first three following the death of the old man he had not slept with Vicky on the same bed. She had slept with women relatives and friends who tried to comfort her. He had slept in the parlour with other men on the first night. But the second night he had returned to his own house. On the third night he joined her again in her father's house. It was on the fourth night that they had shared the same bed. That night, with the tears of mourning still fresh on her cheeks she made him understand that she would like a little sex.

Antony looked baffled but welcomed the idea because it was the only way finding out if the situation had altered. That night Vicky slept with it in her hands, exhausting all her art of manipulation. No good. It would not stir from that stunted position. She may even have contributed to the worsening condition because of the suggestions she kept making to Antony. She would ask him to try fondling it with a thick lather of soap, or palm oil and things of the sort. All these only served to pull Antony farther and farther away from her.

The following morning, Antony spent one whole hour in the bathroom trying to employ all the techniques he had read in books or overheard from conversations about how to arouse sexual desire. It remained motionless. When he emerged from the gruelling session he told Vicky that he would be going to hospital to let the doctor know about it. Having failed, herself, she agreed that it was a case for a doctor.

It was to the Likume General Hospital that he went. After enquiring from different nurses, but without revealing what was actually wrong with him he learned that the doctor to see was Dr. Samkwere Mandieg. He was about fifty years old, or older, and had

been practicing for the past fifteen years. Rather fat, and about a meter and a half in height, he was a very highly respected doctor who was loved all over the town, not only for his selfless dedication to duty but for a very fine sense of humour towards his patients. He was a Urologist who had also studied Psychiatric medicine in the Jewish Hospital in East London, and Gynaecology and Obstetrics in Ibandan.

There were some fifteen patients waiting to see Dr. Mandieg, each patient spending no more than ten minutes. As they waited an interesting scene took place in the doctor's office which kept everybody waiting amused. An old man who had reported with a case of trembling hands was being interviewed by the doctor.

"Do you drink alcohol?" the waiting patients heard the doctor ask him:

"No, doctor," the man said.

"You do not drink at all, pa?" the doctor asked again in apparent surprise.

The old man changed his answer:

"I drink, docta. Small."

"You mean small how?"

"It depends," the man said.

"It depends on what?"

"If I am the one buying," he began with rare honesty, "I can drink like one bottle a day."

"But if it somebody else buying?"

"Ah-ah docta," the man smiled, "it is the man's pocket that will tell me when to stop. How can I deny free drink?"

There was a roar of laughter amongst the waiters. When the man finished and was going out the people laughed again.

Antony found nothing to laugh in it. He was only thinking of how he was going to explain his problem to the doctor. He was wondering what he would say if the whole exercise was going to be overheard by everybody else. The old man's problem might have been laughable, he thought. His was not, and should not be made a joke of.

Antony waited outside his office very patiently until it was his turn to see him. Then he went in. Mandieg sat behind a large rectangular table lined with formica. Laughter was never too far beneath the skin of his face. The configuration of his visage left an indelible impression of a suppressed smile.

He had an egg-shaped head permanently shaven low. His lips were small and the rest of his mouth gave the impression that he was suppressing a laugh that would explode at any moment. There was a certain communication between his eyes and his mouth, and it was obvious that he was not difficult to amuse. He seemed to find so much to laugh at in nearly everything and everybody that came his way, something that irritated Antony immensely.

Antony's eyes did not miss volumes of assorted books. On each side of the table medical books piled with the spines facing him, such that he could read the titles of most of them:

Family Health Guide and Medical Encyclopaedia: Based on the Medical Writings of Benjamin F. Miller, M.D.;

The Medicine Show: Consumers' Union's Practical Guide to Some Everyday Health Problems and Health Products.

Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality: The Art of Selfishness, by David Seabury.

The Common -Sense Book of Mental Health, by Theodore I. Rubin.

Not as a Stranger, by Norton Thomson.

A few were not actually medical books. There was, for instance, Madam Tussaud's Guide to Biographies; The Psychology of Loving, by Ignace Lepp;

Mirages of Marriage, by William Lederer; A Guide to Rational Living.

Directly behind him hung two large colourful anatomical charts. To his right, slightly behind him stood a human skeleton. To the right of the skeleton was a closet behind which he examined patients. The green curtain cutting off the area was slightly pulled, so that Antony could see a small raised bed. To the left as you entered, stood a large cupboard. It had four shelves all lined with white formica which contrasted rather sharply with the brown exterior.

The shutters were made of glass, through which Antony could see several volumes of medical encyclopaedias and magazines on the top and second shelves. The third contained large files, some green, others brown and yellow. On top of the high cupboard stood some large jars and beakers. One of the large jars actually contained a foetus about the size of a normal baby at birth which had been made to lie in the jar as though it was in the mother's womb. There was also a large skull with numerous red colour marks round it, to the right of the jar containing the foetus.

Along the wall past the closet was a wash-hand basin and some tablets to soap. Below the wash hand basin stood a yellow bucket with bits of stained cotton wool, a discarded rubber glove plaster and bits of toilet roll. A strong indeterminate smell hung heavily in the air; there was obviously traces of iodine, turpentine, and perhaps some disinfectant, antiseptics or chloroform involved.

Besides the large cupboard was a large window with a yellow curtain that drooped to just a few centimetres to the floor. It had opaque louvers behind which was glued a wire netting to keep away flies, mosquitoes and other insects.

"Yesssir," Dr. Mandieg folded his hands and looked up at Antony as soon as he had finished writing. "What can I do for you?"

"What's your problem sir" the doctor asked him.

Antony licked his lips, looked nervously round the consultation room and remained silent again. A female nurse sat opposite the doctor, taking notes down which he dictated to her. Antony could not bring himself to explain his problem within her hearing. He scratched his head, stammered briefly and then said:

"It might sound a bit odd. But, doctor, I am sorry, please, I would like to speak to you alone."

There was silence.

The doctor looked across at him for a while and then asked: "Are you a revolution or a revolutionary?"

Antony blinked his eyes rapidly, implying that he did not quite get the man's question.

"You have not come to change our system I hope?"

"Not at all, doctor."

"Then why should my secretary leave?"

"I am just begging you, doctor. Please understand me."

The doctor discerned a note of desperation in his tone, sat silent for a while and then told the nurse:

"Susan, if you continue to sit there and I miss my bribe, you will catch it and bring."

The nurse understood that he was asking her to leave.

Now that they were alone the doctor asked:

"What is this very wonderful thing you want to tell only me?"

"First, doc, let me say at once that it is no bribe. I don't believe in bribes."

"Of course I knew it wasn't. that was only a joke."

Antony did not laugh. He remained silent again. The doctor glanced several times at his watch and sat back looking at Antony. Then he said half-humorously:

"Or should I too leave for you to say what you have to say?"

"Oh no, doctor."

"Speak then."

Antony bits his lips over and over. Then he began very calmly:

"Doctor, I got married last Saturday...."

"I see, Congratulations!" the doctor said.

Antony did not answer. He had not come to announce his marriage. He paused for a while and then said:

"Doctor, and on my first sexual encounter with my wife I had a nightmare of an experience which has rendered me impotent."

"Important!" the doctor exclaimed. "If honeymoon will make you important, then where is the problem? Many people die without ever acquiring any importance..."

"I-m-p-o-t-e-n-t," Antony counted the letters. And then he paused for a while. Was Mandieg making a fool of him? He did not enjoy the joke.

Mandieg's eyes pulled apart, narrowed up and even closed, giving him a sly, cunning look. Not vicious but benign. There was a very long silence.

"Is that all?"

"It is all, doctor."

The doctor smiled and frowned at the same time, paused for a while and then with the corners of his mouth announcing an on-coming smile he asked: "So what medicine do you want me to give you since you have already done the diagnosis?"

Antony clasped his hands between his knees and said:

"I am very sorry for my language doctor, but my organ just wouldn't rise again. It is completely dead."

Dr. Mandieg smiled and then said almost to himself:

"What an unfortunate moment for a hunter to lose his gun!"

He remained tranquil. "I fail to see the humour in this," he felt like telling Mandieg. Was he talking to another Eru? Why would such an important institution as a General Hospital be run by a joker?

“Mr. Whatever...”

“Antony,” Antony told him.

“Mr. Antony, if all my patients came in here having diagnosed their illnesses that would make my job a whole lot easier. For the Government to put me in charge of so many patients is indicative of the fact that I know my job. Simply describe the symptoms and I’ll tell you what you might have.”

“I have not said I have diagnosed my case,” Antony said. “I said I had a feeling that I am impotent.”

Dr. Mandieg stretched his hand to the right corner of the table and pulled out a bluish-black medical encyclopaedia and, flipping through the pages threw open the page concerning impotence. He seemed to read as if he was refreshing his mind on the issue.

Antony knew that he was reading if for him to hear.

“Impotence has been described by competent authorities as penis rebellion,” he began. “A pen that would not write, a car that would not start, a key that melts in the lock, in a word, a sexual accident.”

He looked across at Antony. Antony was staring at him, confused. He did not know how to take Mandieg. Mandieg, on his part, sensed the doubt in Antony’s mind and immediately turned the book around to face him.

“Read,” he said. “Read aloud.”

“Types of impotence,” Antony read on.

1. Absolute impotence;
2. Copulatory impotence;
3. Premature ejaculation;
4. Retarded ejaculation.”

Antony put his fore-finger between the pages he had read and closing the book looked up at Mandieg.

“So where do you belong on the scale of impotence?” Mandieg asked.

It seemed to be Antony’s turn to smile.

“I don’t know whether I even belong there, doctor,” he confessed.

“I know,” Mandieg said. “Come here, please”, he said rising. Antony followed him behind a curtain at the corner in the room. There he asked Antony to pull down his trousers and underpants. He did.

Dr. Mandieg went down on one knee, put on a glove and taking Antony's organ in his hands began to fondle it, pulling this way and tapping that way. When that did not produce any visible results he went of the cupboard close by and brought a slimy liquid which he applied over it and began to fondle it again. It sprang to life and began to swell until it almost filled the man's hands. He exclaimed:

"My word! Man, you've got a real sex machine!"

Antony knew that it was no understatement. But the fact that for all its bulk it had been for Vicky like a teaspoon in a tea-cup, made him sadder in his silence.

"So you see that you are not impotent after all?" Mandieg said throwing both hands at Antony.

"Why did you do to it, doctor?" he asked rather childishly as though the man had just fixed a radio or something that was not part of his own body.

"When Christ asked Lazarus to rise from the dead," Mandieg began half-smiling, "nobody asked him what he had done. I simply told it what it was missing by hiding in there, and then, as Christ said to the lame man, I asked it to rise up and work."

Antony seemed unresponsive to any kind of joke. Mandieg, finally concluding that Antony could not take a joke, switched seriousness into his countenance.

"Copulation is a combined physical as well as an emotional activity" he began, "that requires absolute concentration, will power and understanding. In the sex act the sexual organ only responds to your own thoughts. It has no brain of its own.

"Every erection is the combination of erotic impulses originating within the brain and erotic impulses originating in the outside world that are perceived and processed by the brain. The two sources of sexual energy have got to communicate, they have got to reinforce each other. The sex act is not like you light a stove and go out looking for oil to fry your food with. The stove won't bother. It will burn on and on. In the sex act the reaction should be instantaneous."

Antony sat mute. Mandieg was absolutely right. The thought of Vicky naked by him made him feel sick.

"The communication line between your brain and your organ has been short-circuited."

Again Antony heaved a sigh, much louder and more desperate. Yes, the doctor was right, he told himself.

"The problem now is discovering where the short-circuit emanated from. Some obstacle has implanted itself between your brain and your Long John Silver. Did you read *Treasure Island*, in school?" Mandieg cut in from nowhere."

"I did *Treasure Island*," he said almost disinterestedly, as if angry but afraid to show his anger, as if afraid to reprimand Mandieg.

"What exactly happened?" he asked. "She would not respond?"

"Quite the reverse, doctor. She knows too much." As he said so, Antony's mind slid back to the moments leading up to the heart-rendering climax. Vicky was tossing him up and down, from the left to the right, groaning, farting as he hung in there motionless, helpless, trapped more or less. "Your nails are wounding me...." "Nails!" he remembered asking himself with embarrassment. He never kept long nails. Who did she think was on her, he remembered asking himself. Was she merely replaying a cassette from some earlier experiences?"

"So you are back to active service," the doctor said. "Wait a minute" he knelt back down with a deep frown. Something like a drop of yellowish – white puss had dropped on to the palm of his glove. The doctor examined it closely and then looked up with utmost contempt and indignation at Antony.

Antony followed him with his eyes. Only then did he notice that there was something else wrong with him. The doctor took in a very long breath and said: "O.K. I understand you fully now. That's very smart of you. Dress up." He sounded sulky. Returning to his desk he pressed a bell and the nurse came back in. Antony was still standing behind the curtain, his trousers and pants now right down on his ankles, his mouth growing wider and wider open, his organ shrinking again to a stump.

He let his eyes fall down on the seat of his pants again. It was slightly messed. He had changed them that morning and washed the other one without taking care to see if there was anything amiss. The discovery petrified him. He called feebly from where he stood:

"Doctor, what is wrong with me?"

"You just hurry up and go for your lab test. I have a lot of people to attend to." There was a fury in his voice.

“Doctor, what is wrong with me?” Antony asked again.

The doctor still did not answer. With his trousers hanging very loosely about his waist, unbelted and unbuttoned, he walked up to the doctor, took the card from him, stared at it unbelievably for a very long time and then asked:

“Doctor, I beg you to tell me. Do I have venereal disease?”

“You have headache,” the doctor said. “Next man” he told the nurse. Antony stood wondering until another patient came in and he was forced to carry himself out, humiliated. He spent an hour in the lab and another hour waiting for the results of the test conducted on him.

By this time his repulsion for Vicky had turned to unreserved hostility. He thought of her now not just as a source of unhappiness but a real danger to his health and entire life. When he brought back the results from the laboratory the doctor looked at the card for a fraction of a minute and said:

“Ya, first week.”

“What, doctor?” Antony pressed on miserably.

“Your impotence, or whatever you choose to call gonorrhoea.” He then went on to write out a lengthy prescription of drugs which he held out to Antony. Antony looked at it for a whole minute, unable to lift his hand and receive it. Then he asked again:

“Doctor, do I have gonorrhoea?”

The doctor smiled to himself and said:

“That is news to you, not so?”

There was silence. Then he decided to give Antony some advice:

“You young men should be made to understand that it is our honest duty here to treat diseases, to attend to every patient with any kind of disease at any time, without fear of favour. That is why they call this place a Government General Hospital. We are paid for that....”

“Doctor, please, tell me why you are saying all this,” Antony pleaded, determined to clear himself of any conclusions the doctor had drawn.

“I don’t know why I am saying it, sir. But the story of your organ dying at your wedding night was unnecessary. You did not require such a lie to receive treatment. After all nobody in his right senses would ever have accused you of inventing gonorrhoea. That disease is old. Older than you can imagine. Older than medical science itself. Honesty is the best policy.”

There was a very long silence. Antony thought now of his reputation. He was always conducted himself with respect. And here he was, being insulted and shamed by a man of respect who was meeting him for the first time. All because of Vicky!

"I honestly did not know doctor that I had any such thing," he said very frankly.

"But now you know," Dr. Mandieg said. He saw no reason for believing him. "What concerns us here and now is whether you can lead us to the particular harlot or harlots from whom you acquired it. The Government is mounting a big V.D hunt and there are officers and hospital authorities available to help you, once you are sure. Do you remember any such woman or women with whom you have been sleeping within the last week?"

Antony took in a very long breath and remained silent. That the only woman he could mention as the harlot who had given him that disease was his newly married wife, was a heavy load to carry on the mind.

"Doctor, we are not talking about a harlot here. We are talking about my wife." Here a tired smile flashed across his face and he gave a very long sigh.

There was silence.

The nurse looked up at him and then turned toward the doctor who immediately sensed something tragic in the answer and the very heavily charged feeling with which it was delivered.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"There is nothing else I can say, doctor. The woman I got married to last week is the only woman I have gone to bed with for years..." he hesitated and then asked:

"Doctor, do you think a man can contract VD from a public toilet?"

Mandieg looked briefly at him and then said: "Of Course, if a man and a woman enjoy themselves even in a well, the chances of contracting it are the same. I don't see why you cannot catch VD in a latrine."

"I mean whether you can catch VD by going to the toilet?"

Mandieg shook his head in denial.

"And as you have just said, the gonorrhoea is in its first week. So if we are talking of any harlot we are talking of my wife. She is called Vicky."

He was still standing up. The doctor asked him to sit down. Then he asked him:

“Are you very sure of what you are saying?”

“I have no reason to tell you a lie, doctor. It is not in my nature. That is why when you misconstrued my reasons for saying what I said when I came in here, I felt hurt.”

“Antony in my position could never have concluded otherwise,” the doctor said to him. “Such things happen here every day.”

Antony shrugged.

“Where do you live?” the doctor asked him.

Antony told him.

“Now, let me suggest one thing. Your wife will have to come here too. As soon as possible. And, this might be interfering in your private life, considering that you have just married. You will refrain from any serious contact with her until she too is examined and the two of you are cured. I guess you know what I mean by serious contact?”

“I do not even see myself having anything to do with her any more doctor. I positively hate her now.”

The doctor knew that it could be quite a serious matter. But he switched on a smile to lighten the burden for Antony.

“That doesn’t sound like sense in my ears at all. Just do as I ask you to do. I will be expecting to see her here tomorrow. Tell her I would like to see her. Or come with her.”

Antony sat silent for a very long time and then he asked:

“But doctor, how is that possible? What reason will I give for your wanting to see her? How can I even get myself to tell her what the situation is?”

“But it must be you to do it, the only man who shares in her secrets. Even though I am a Medical Officer and I am insisting that you have her cured, I cannot just stroll into your house and say: ‘I suspect that you have gonorrhoea, come for treatment.’ You see how ridiculous it sounds?”

Antony was silent for a while and then said:

“Doctor, I don’t see myself ever opening my mouth to say such a thing to a woman who has done such a thing to me.”

“That is the test of true love. To remove the dirt from your wife’s lips and still kiss them. When the priest said: ‘For better or for worse’, what did you think he meant?”

Antony held his head down and pulled at his beard in silence.

Antony knew that the doctor was right in saying that he must be the one to tell Vicky. He would tell her without caring how she would take it. But he needed to be very different from his usual self to talk to her about it. He needed to be drunk.

Returning home he called at a roadside bar and drank his first beer since he vowed many years ago never to taste alcohol. Before he finished the first glass of beer he could feel himself already bold enough to say anything to anybody at any time.

The courage, however, seemed to last only while he drank. By the time he actually reached home the alcohol had receded to the extent that he needed another beer to attain the level of boldness he needed to confront her. But he decided not to risk another drink lest it should make him look stupid.

Vicky was not at home when he came in.

He went up to his bookshelf and took out his dictionary. Ever since the discovery of the disease in the hospital the word ROTTEN which Eru had used to describe Vicky, came back to his mind in full force. He knew what ROTTEN meant, but decided to look it up to see how right Eru was in using it on her. There were three meanings:

1. foully decomposing or decaying
2. bad-smelling
3. morally corrupt.

He smacked his lips and threw the dictionary on the floor. Vicky, he was convinced, was all three. As soon as she returned he inquired sternly:

“Where are you from, my wife?”

“Have you been waiting for long Tony? The door was open...”

“Yes, I just went to collect our black clothes for the mourning. Here is yours....”

He did not look at her

“I need more than ten blacks now. There is too much for me to mourn already for.”

His tone was fierce, but she could not tell what was happening. Coming up and sitting by him she asked:

“Did you see the doctor, Tony?”

He said nothing.

“Your eyes are so red Tony.” She said, bending closer and looking into his face. Then suddenly she examined: “And you have been drinking, Tony. Your breath is smelling all alcohol!”

“I have been drinking. And you have been doing what?”

She swallowed her spittle loudly and said nothing more. He shook his head sadly and said again:

“Yes. I have been drinking.”

“But you never used to drink...”

“I have changed my mind. Now I drink.”

“So you deceived me, Tony?”

“Well I deceived myself.”

She rose and went into the kitchen and brought a plate of groundnuts which she placed on the table before them.

“Tony you don’t want to tell me?” she began again. “Did you see the doctor?”

“I saw the doctor.”

“What did he say? Did it die?”

Antony looked across at her and remained silent.

“Eru just came here and said he has something to tell you quickly. He just returned from his journey...”

Antony rose immediately and went out of the house

“Are you going to his place?” she followed him to the door and asked.

“Yes.”

“Wait for me, please, I want us to...”

“No. Don’t come with me,” he said angrily.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Eru came out of his house and met Antony at the veranda where he said immediately:

“Bo, accept my deepest sympathy for the loss of your father-in-law. I only heard it when it got here. It’s so bad. I never heard he was sick at all. I know how much you loved and respected him.”

Antony breathed in and out and then said out of mere politeness: “Well, thank you bo Eru.”

The two then walked in. Eru had been cutting out some pictures of women in all forms of undress from a Playboy magazine which he had bought in Tetseale. Those that he had already cut lay carelessly on the table in the centre of the floor. Small women with abnormally large breasts lay in a separate corner while those with very large buttocks and small breasts lay in another corner. In the space between the groups lay several others with wide open legs exposing their sexual organs in the most obscene manner. He went to the bag he had just brought from Tetseale and took out a book and handing to Antony said:

“I have something here which will help you very much.”

Antony took it and glanced at the title – THE TECHNIQUE OF SEX. Then he placed it calmly on the table before them. Eru’s gift brought back as never before, the thoughts of what had happened between him and Vicky in his hotel room n Mulyoka, and the conclusions he had drawn regarding her past life.

“Bo Eru, why do you give me such a book?” He asked.

“You don’t like it?”

Antony was silent.

“It is made for married men,” Eru pointed out.

“Besides, there is something inside which I want you to see. Something very good. Something you would like to see.”

Antony did not ask him what it was or where it was in the book. He only went on to explain his problem. He asked Eru:

“Bo, have you heard about the way that old man died?”

“Which one? Your father-in-law?”

Antony nodded and told him:

“That man was a real devil.”

Eru smiled and kept quiet. Antony had expected him to ask him whether they had not tried to convince him about it. Eru did not. He only asked:

“What did he do this time?”

“He tied all his money into one bundle and tried to dump it into a latrine before dying.”

This made Eru laugh for over one minute. And when he stopped he said nothing about it. This pained Antony very much because it seemed to imply that he had expected such a thing to happen to the man.

“Bo Antony, do you know the girl I was always dancing with at the wedding?” he asked.

It took Antony a very long time to say:

“I don’t quite know her. But I might recognise her if I met her.”

Eru went to his bag, took out a picture of two girls and asked if he could make her out. Antony pointed to the right one. Then he asked him how he got the picture.

“She gave it to me in Tetsale. I went with her. The other girl there is her best friend. She took me to her place the day after I slept in her house.”

“You slept in her house.”

“In her hole itself. But that is not the thing I want to tell you. When I went there I saw that her friend was more beautiful. So what did I do?”

“What did you do?”

“Guess.”

“I don’t know which way to guess such a thing.”

“I crossed the carpet and put my candidature.”

Antony shook his head and remained silent and tense with the weight of what he had come to tell Eru on his mind.

“And last night, guess what I did.”

“I can’t guess.”

“I scattered her to pieces. I dug her inside out.”

Antony did not say anything.

"She is in the University," Eru went on. "She is called Janet. She will be coming here next week for an away-match."

"And what happens to the other girl?"

"I don't know yet. But the Bible says one servant cannot serve two masters."

Here he stopped talking and opened the book Antony had abandoned. He withdrew an envelope from it and giving it to Antony said: "I told you that there was something very good inside the book but you thought I was just joking. You have been employed, finally."

Antony took the envelope, tore it open and read the contents. It was true that he had been employed. He had been posted to Sigili-Mundu as English Language Teacher. He put the letter back in the envelope and threw it on the table.

Eru was baffled by the complete lack of emotion, by his gratitude. Not a single word of thanks!

"An old friend of mine gave me the list of postings. She took it from the Ministry of Education. It would have taken another month to appear in the papers here for us to see."

Antony breathed in and out loudly and said nothing.

Eru looked at him for a very long time. Then smiling contemptuously he said:

"Bo Antony, I think this your wisdom has become a kind of madness now."

There was silence.

Antony did not talk. The news of his employment was undoubtedly the most important piece of information he could ever have received at that time. But it was not an answer to the problem now on his mind. He was conscious of the fact that he had not shown Eru the gratitude he deserved for bringing the good news. It ached him that he could do nothing about it. Once again, it was all Vicky's fault. When at last he forced himself to say something he asked:

"Where am I posted like that bo, Eru?"

"I thought that was what anybody who has seen all the walls of a college would have said the moment he read it. Find out from the paper yourself. If I was the one who received that kind of news, even though I have never been to the University, I would have said

“thank you.” Take it home and leave me alone. If you like you can take it and wipe your anus. Who cares? After all you are the one looking for a job.”

Antony drew in a long breath, smacked his lips, looked about him purposelessly and then rose and bade Eru goodbye.

Eru did not answer.

He moved with very heavy steps towards the door, halted, contemplated for about a minute and then came back.

“Bo Eru, I beg you to listen to me,” he pleaded. “You are my best friend...”

“Your only friend,” Eru corrected him and went back to his cuttings which he had now started pasting on the wall.

“There is something eating me up bo, Eru. Something very serious. Something which forces me to behave out of my element. That is why you see me behaving like such a mad man.”

Eru turned and when he looked into his face there was an expression of extreme weariness which had never seen on him before. Antony had spoken with a quavering voice, and his lips were still trembling long after he had spoken. His eyes too seemed to retreat unusually into their sockets. Eru walked up to him and asked:

“Antony, what?”

Antony sat back down, supported his head in his right palm and as if counting his words said:

“My confidence in my own judgments has been shaken to the roots. I chose the wrong girl. I don’t want to have anything to do with Vicky again.”

“The Vicky you married last week or some other one?”

“The same one. Victoria Godsabi Ngang-nkwebre.”

“Why?”

Antony paced up and down for and down for a long time and then said:

“Bo, shut the door and I will show you what she has done to me.”

Eru did so. Antony then took his hand into his and walked to the window. There he loosened his belt, pushed down his pair of trousers and underpants and, leaning backwards asked Eru to look into the seat of the pants. Eru looked at it and then Antony held up his organ in his right hand and pressed it.

“Look at the tip, bo Eru,” he said.

Eru looked at it and then exclaimed:

“Gono-c-o-c-u-s! This is VD.”

Antony smiled drily.

“Bo, where is it from?”

“Vicky, bo. For the first time in my life I have VD. That is why I could not behave like myself at anything you said.”

There was silence.

“How do you know it is from Vicky?”

“Bo, Eru, I could never have expected you to doubt my integrity when it comes to women. You certainly know more than anybody else that I do not go after women. I slept with Vicky last Sunday morning.”

“Was that the first time really?”

“The very first time. And the doctor says it is gonorrhoea in its first week.”

Eru held up his trousers to him and told him to dress up. When he had belted the trousers Eru patted him on the shoulder and said casually:

“Come on bo, cheer up. This is not the end of the world.”

“It might very well be the end of the world,” Antony said. “It is a very serious problem.”

“Well, it could be. But I see it as serious just because it is happening to you who take everything too seriously. Gonorrhoea is not syphilis,” Eru told him. “And even if it is, it can still be cured. I have gonorrhoea every month. I never let anybody know. Sometimes when I get it I try and dig as many girls as I can before I start treating myself. I pass it round.”

“You pass it round, Eru?”

“Of course. Why do you ask as if I bought it from the market? When they give me I also give to others. The Bible says it is more blessed to give than to receive. Tit for tat. When I am suffering and spending, they too are suffering and spending.”

Antony felt his flesh crawl.

“Which doctor did you meet?”

“They call him Mandieg, Samkwere Mandieg,” Antony told Eru.

“You went to the right man at the right time,” Eru said. “If all doctors were like him, why should I see sickness and run away? A man who would make you feel well long before he prescribes you a drug! I will suggest one thing,” Eru said, “if only you will listen this time.”

“What is it, Eru?”

“Let this thing remain a secret.”

Antony smacked his lips and tapped his left foot several times. But he remained silent. Then opening the envelope again and stretching the document of his employment he asked:

“Where is Sigili-Mundu, and what am I expected to do?”

“Sigili-Mundu is in the Extreme North Province. The District Office here will give you and your wife a transport requisition and you take off, that’s all. Your report for duty at your station.”

Antony’s brows drew together and then he asked:

“Extreme North?”

“But you told us that you cannot work anywhere...”

“I am not complaining. I am just enquiring about where the place is.”

After all, he thought, he would like to go anywhere just to flee from Vicky! Eru went for a very old atlas, opened it and the two traced the location of the place together.

“I shall find out more about the means of getting there and the transport, or any such thing and tell you.”

“I shall be very glad bo Eru, I shall also start finding out this right from this night even” he said and paused for some time. Then he said: “Bo, Eru, there is still a problem, and I want you to help me...”

“At your service,” Eru said.

“Still on Vicky. I want you to help me to put the issue to her. The doctor says I should tell her and ask her to come for treatment too. I just don’t know how to go about it.”

“That is not the kind of thing I call help,” Eru said shaking his head several times in refusal. “It is harm. I have told you that the best thing to do is to keep it secret. If the doctor has discovered that you have VD that is enough. If you think it is hard to tell your wife yourself, we shall change the hospital. If you want it, your wife will get cured without knowing about it.”

“How?”

“It is easy. We go to another doctor and explain to him and tell him that we don’t want her to know. We bribe him. We come back and find an excuse to get Vicky there. After all you have just married. You tell her you want to prepare her for the coming of a child or something of the sort. Then the doctor begins to give her gonococcus injections. How will she know what is in the injections? You must use your head.”

Antony had long started denying with his head, and when Eru finished talking he said with his lips turned downwards in contempt:

“No, bo Eru. It has reached a stage where I cannot try to deceive myself. Vicky must know, and know it from the same source and face the same humiliation that I faced. There is no other way of making her learn. The doctor made me look like a fraud. Besides, I have already told the doctor that I got it from her and that I will bring her to him tomorrow. And wherever that Sigili-Mundu is, she will be left behind to stay with those same men who gave her the gonorrhoea.”

Eru shrugged with a smile: “As you make ya bed, so shall you die on it.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Antony returned home even moodier than he felt when he left. When he entered the house Vicky came up to him to find out why Eru wanted to see him so quickly.

"It doesn't concern you," he spat and went to sit down in stony silence. It was she herself who reintroduced the tell-tale topic. She asked him:

"Tony, you consulted the doctor-eh?"

"Yes."

"It has really been worrying me since morning, Tony."

Antony felt bitter gall creep into his heart. He told her offensively:

"I know that you would be the most worried woman on earth Vicky, if you were told that a penis had stopped functioning."

Vicky missed the point and took it for a compliment which made her laugh heartily. Then as if to suggest that they try it she rose and came to sit by him and attempted to place her head on his laps. He sighed and moving away told her carelessly:

"You must go to see him tomorrow, Vicky."

"Him who, Tony?"

"The doctor."

"So soon, Tony? Why?"

Antony did not answer her.

That night Antony refused to share the same bed with Vicky. He decided he would pass the night in a chair in the parlour. It was only after very much persuasion on her part that he changed his mind. And even then, he did so only because he found it uncomfortable to lie in the chair. He took off only his shoes. His coat, trousers and tie remained on him, and he lay dejectedly on his back on the edge of the bed with his feet resting on a stool he pulled to the side of the bed.

Vicky was restless and anxious to know what was eating him up. He would not tell her. When she tried to cheer him up with a kiss he pushed her away from his side and said firmly:

“Vicky, if I am to kiss you, you must first of all see the doctor.”

Perplexed and mortified she asked:

“Am I smelling that you won’t even kiss me?”

“So you don’t know?” Antony asked her. It was at this point that she sensed that there was something wrong with their relationship, and that somehow inexplicably Antony was holding her responsible for his depression.

The following morning they left for the hospital together. By this time Vicky had become even more anxious than Antony to see the doctor. When it was their turn Antony took the lead and they went in. The doctor asked him to leave his wife alone with him. Antony promptly obeyed. After she had sat down the doctor asked her:

“You are Mrs. Antony, madam?”

“I am doctor,” she nodded nervously.

The doctor paused for a while and then asked:

“You already know why I asked your husband to bring you here I suppose, madam?”

Vicky looked at him for a brief confused second and said:

“No, doctor. I don’t.”

“No?”

“No doctor. My husband told me nothing.”

“He did not discuss the state of his health with you?”

“He has told me nothing, doctor.”

“What did he say you people were coming here for?”

“He refused to tell me, doctor.”

Silence.

“Doctor, since last night he started telling me that I should come and see you. That you want to see me. That I should see you before I even kiss him.”

Dr. Samkwere Mandieg rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. He smiled in spite of himself, but one could see that he was angry. Why, he asked himself, should Antony transfer the burden of revealing the painful secret to him.

“Well, madam, your husband has behaved very poorly so far,” he began. “Very very poorly. I shouldn’t be the first person to tell you this. And it is not really the best thing to discuss the very first

time we are meeting each other. But the point is that your husband came here yesterday with a peculiar problem. Upon examining him we discovered that he had some mild infection of the urinary tract. He has made us understand that he could never have had it from any other source except his wife.

"At least that is what he claims. But you know how men can always shift blames onto women. So I asked him to inform you about the situation and encourage you too to come here and be examined. If it turns out that you really have it, than it is important that you two be completely cured at the same time."

Vicky had been holding her head down, avoiding the doctor's eyes as he spoke. When the man finished talking she lifted it. Her eyes were heavy with tears. She felt crushed with shame, not at Antony's refusal to discuss it with her but at the possibility that it might be true, and that Antony may never love her again.

"What does doctor really mean by urinary tract infection?"

"We will find that out together, madam. That's why you have come here."

She obeyed the doctor's orders that she should go to the laboratory to be examined.

One hour afterwards she was back in office with a card. In the space provided for the results of the findings the nurse examining her had noted V.D. +++

"Is it true, doctor?" She asked as the man studied the rest of the results attached.

"I should think so madam," the doctor said. "The results say **positive**." He refrained from asking her any questions about her sex life that he knew would only embarrass her the more. He down-played the degree of seriousness of the case. But Vicky was able to tell from the long list of drugs to be bought that it was not a light case.

She knew she was no virgin. But none of the men with whom she had had affairs in her past ever come back to complain of any such thing. She had therefore never had any reason for going to the hospital for any examination that would have saved her this embarrassment. It must therefore have been in her for years. What misfortune!

"My husband will kill me, doctor," she said when the doctor asked her to leave. She refused to leave the office. In a bid to intervene the doctor rose and went out to get Antony so that they resolve the matter together. But there was no sign of him anywhere.

"Your husband has gone away, madam," he told Vicky.

Vicky was silent for a very long time. Then rising and going out she looked round apprehensively before returning to thank the doctor. She then carried her humiliated self to the veranda where she stood for a very long time, trembling in every limb with fright and shame, her eyes clouded with tears. Now convinced that Antony had returned home she walked across to the taxi station and took one home.

Antony had gone home. knowing that the doctor was going to prove him right and Vicky guilty, he had decided to wait. Not wishing to confront her there in the hospital he had retreated to the back of a hedge far on the other side of the hospital grounds from where he could see her leave. He watched her take a taxi and drive away. Then he came and asked to see the doctor. As soon as he came in the doctor asked:

"You met your wife?"

"No doctor."

"Where were you?"

"I went back to town, doctor," he lied. "What is th situation like?"

"I have not been pleased in the least by how you have handled this problem. You haven't treated your wife fairly. I asked you to talk things over with her at home..."

"Doctor, I could not carry the instructions the way..."

"They were no instructions. I was merely giving you a piece of advice. Had you followed it, that would have saved your wife the sort of embarrassment she suffered this morning. She should not have heard this kind of thing for the first time from the mouth of a third party like myself who cannot give her the kind of sympathetic comfort she actually deserves."

The two men looked at each other for a while and then Antony said:

"I am sorry doctor, but I just couldn't." Then he asked the question uppermost in his mind: "Does she have the disease, doctor?"

"Well we have put her on the same injections and drugs as you," the doctor said evasively. He spoke as though it did not matter in the least.

"Meaning, therefore, that I was pretending, doctor that she gave it to me?"

"Even if it means that, that itself means nothing," the doctor said. Antony sat for a very long time. Then rising to his feet he said rather abruptly:

"Doctor, I am going to Sigili-Mundu."

The doctor looked confusedly at him for a very long time, wondering whether he had suddenly lost his senses.

"Because you have V.D?"

"I have been employed by the Government and posted to work there as a teacher doctor."

"That's o.k. You people can still follow up your treatment there. They can be administered anywhere and the effectiveness will not be hampered."

"I will go there alone doctor, I have lost all interest in her doctor."

"Because of the infection or you have something else between you?"

"I have no other cause doctor. This alone is too much." The doctor asked him to sit down and then he asked him his age.

"Thirty nine, doctor."

"What qualification do you have?"

"I have an M.A in Political Science from Legon, Ghana, doctor."

The doctor did not look as impressed as Antony had anticipated. He only smiled contemptuously and said:

"A man of thirty and with such a university degree does not reason this way..."

"What way, doctor? How am I reasoning?"

"Like an infant. Like somebody who has not been to school."

Antony felt insulted. It was an attack on his own self-esteem which he always fought to protect. The man seemed now to be speaking his language.

"How can I reasoning like an infant doctor?"

The doctor did not answer.

"Put yourself in my place, doctor, and see if you..."

"Nobody needs to put himself in your place to see how very wrong you are. You do not seem to understand the full implications of the relationship or marriage."

There was silence.

"Problems like this come up every single minute of every single day of every single week of every single month to the year. But they don't break homes. In fact, they needn't. Everybody has something to hide."

Antony remained thoughtfully silent.

"You don't need to go about announcing: 'My wife has give me VD' and the like. It has got to remain a secret, a closely guarded secret. It will only remain a secret if you do not do anything to draw the attention of outsiders to it."

Antony reflected for awhile and then said:

"I have thought things over very seriously doctor..."

"And you think it will be best for you not to go with your wife?"

"Yes doctor."

"That is wrong," Dr. Mandieg told him. Then as if he had changed the subject he asked Antony: "Have you in the course of your life ever heard of a certain Englishman called Shakespeare?"

Antony raised his head, tried to answer but remained silent again, wondering if there was any other Englishman worth knowing called Shakespeare.

"I know Shakespeare of course. Is there anybody who has been to school who does not know Shakespeare?"

The man shrugged and said:

"There are millions of people who have been to universities, but who do not behave as though they had ever heard of Shakespeare. At least they do nothing to prove it..."

"So you think I should be one of those, doctor?"

"One never knows," the doctor said.

Antony shrugged with offended dignity and sat quiet.

"If you have heard o him before, well and good. If you haven't, listen. Shakespeare said many truths. But the greatest was..." Here he took in a very long breath, placed his hands flat before him on the table and said calmly: "Mr. Antony,

Love is not love.

Which alters when it alternation finds
or bends with remover to remove.

Or, no, it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempest and is never shaken.

It is the star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Amen."

A sudden silence fell between the two men. Then Dr. Mandieg asked with a faint smile playing on his lips:

"Did you say you know Shakespeare?"

Antony was silent. He did not know whether the man intended to ask him to quote a passage of that length to justify his answer. He knew he could never be able to do that. He could scarcely recall from what part of Shakespeare's works the lines had been lifted, whether they were parts of a poem or a play. The man had made him feel so inadequate. And the aptness of the quotation to the situation that confronted him, the solemnity with which they were uttered, gave them the quality of an oracular pronouncement which seemed to command from him an admission of guilt.

"Does this need any translation?" Dr. Mandieg asked.

"It doesn't, doctor. I understand," he said, fidgeted with his hands for a very long time and then asked nervously:

"Am I at the edge of doom therefore, doctor?"

"I didn't say you were."

Antony sighed, shook his head exasperatingly and then remained silent again. Dr. Mandieg was still bent on convincing him. He said:

"Let's look at it this way, Mr. Antony. In my tribe, our people consider this thing we call marriage as a bush path leading to one goal – happy home with your wife. They say when you set out on that path as you have done now, you should look only straight ahead of you. If you begin to look at the side as you go along, what will you see? Excrement. You will see excrement, and that will spoil your happiness on that journey. It will spoil your appetite. Just look straight towards that goal. What you need in marriage is tolerance and concentration on your goal. Ignore this particular excrement that is lying on the side of your path and go straight on. Dirt only enters into the eyes of those that are open."

Once again Antony was silent for a very long time. Then apparently not yet convinced he said:

"But, doctor, where the excrement is lying directly front of you like this, how can you ignore it?"

"Nothing is lying in front of you. The road is still wide open. The excrement is lying very far in the bush. It is your careless mind that is seeing it as directly in front of you. You have left the path and have gone to stand behind the excrement in the bush. So you see it as standing in front of you. But even if it was, you could always ignore it if you want to. Step over it and go on as if it was never there. You see what I mean?"

"I do doctor." Antony rose to his feet again, took two steps towards the door and, halting, turned round and said:

"Doctor, I still have a problem."

"What is it?"

"I don't know how to confront her on the issue."

"There shouldn't be any confrontation whatsoever."

"But how do o introduce the topic to her?"

"The most serious part of it is gone already. You both now know what the situation. So it need not pose any problem. But remember that any formality will only ruin things. Don't call her to a secret corner or anything of the sort. Don't make her feel that you are about to discuss something serious. Present the issue as light-heartedly as possible. It is your reaction that will determine how she would react too to it. Just come in smiling, wherever she may be, and tell her: "it's one of those things sweetheart. I'm sorry I could not tell you myself. But we are lucky that the problem is in very good hands. It will soon be all over." Then you give her a kiss. That's all. If you have ever loved this girl, there should be no difficulty in telling her or in having her go over it."

"That will be condoning evil, doctor," Antony said with a decision that seemed to embarrass the doctor.

"What?"

"Such an attitude." He walked back to the table, sat down and said very gravely: "Doctor, I have a principle, never to deceive myself or anybody else. It will be wrong and most dishonest for me to pretend that it doesn't matter as you were saying, when in fact it was the only thing that mattered. It was not in my nature to pretend..."

“That is next to saying that is not in your nature to exist at all.”

“Why doctor?”

“Because all life is pretence. Every man in his best state is altogether vanity.” Then he added with a touch of humour, “whatever that means.”

Antony saw some sense in what he was saying. But he still found it very hard to yield. He pointed out:

“But a man should have a guiding principle. Some philosophy of life. A formula for living, doctor...”

“I will be the very last man to disagree with you on that score. But to insist on principles to this ridiculous extent is something that should best be practiced by a hermit. Among people, in society, principles should be constantly readjusted. Principles are made to guide you to live happily. And if you think that happiness can under circumstances as flimsy as these be sacrificed for any philosophy, I will be the first to say no. A thousand times no.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Antony did not go straight to his house. He needed somebody to be present with him when he met Vicky. Such a person was Eru. He went to his office but he was absent. He proceeded to his house but he was still not there. Now that he was forced to talk to Vicky himself he decided to steel his spirits with a bottle of beer.

When he arrived at his own house he found Eru. He was sitting with Vicky in the parlour and she appeared to be explaining something to him in a most bereaved mood.

"I am just from your office, bo Eru. I went to your house too."

"The office is not the right place to find me," Eru said laughing. "I go there only for roll-call in the morning. Then without wasting any time he said: "Bo, sit down." There was a seriousness in his tone which struck Antony as unusual for he had never known Eru to be capable of such emotions.

"What bo?" Antony sat down.

"Bo, your wife was just telling me something here which I think we should not allow to go beyond this point." He spoke as though he had heard the story of the V.D for the first time from Vicky.

"What did she tell you?" Antony's voice was calm and he was not looking at Vicky at all. On her part, she was staring blankly at him, her eyes swollen and red from excessive weeping and her cheeks lined with caked tears. Eru did not answer him directly. He instead said:

"Antony, bo, I think this is the wrongest moment to do anything to pain Vicky. I do not need to mention what has already happened to her in the family..."

"I do not insist that you should do so either," Antony said.

"Fine. Vicky tells me bo, as a family friend, and as the only one who can share in the secrets of this house, that the doctor has discovered this morning that she had V.D. and so you have it as a

result of contact with her as your wife. She was saying that you really knew of it since yesterday but did not mention anything to her. Instead you began to do I don't know what."

The card which Vicky had brought from the hospital was in Eru's hand as he spoke. When Antony leaned towards it with curiosity he held it for him to read. Antony took it and looked at it for a very long time. Then he said with biting irony:

"It is my fault, bo Eru. I discovered that she had gonorrhoea only yesterday, but forgot to tell her. She has had the plague all her life but was never anxious to let me know. It was indeed my fault..."

"She might never have known that she had it bo I ..."

"How could she? Everybody has something to hide Eru..."

"That's true Antony. But it doesn't mean that whatever is in you, you are hiding it."

Antony tried to say something but bitterness choked his throat. Eru went on:

"Vicky is begging you. She is pleading bo, that you forgive her and take her back as before."

Antony's smouldering anger burst into flames. Shooting up from where he had been sitting he went up to Vicky and asked:

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Tony you have been too cold towards me since yesterday, she said in between sobs. "Since you heard it."

"Toonneeyyyuuu habb bing tuu collldd towaad mee." Antony repeated the words insultingly.

"She says she does not in the name of God Almighty know how it ever came about that..."

"Let her leave innocent God alone. If she had forgotten let her listen to me remind her." He knelt down in front of her on one knee. Paralysed with shame and guilt and the very anger in his voice, Vicky could not save herself further embarrassment by going out of the house.

"My most blessed innocent Vicky, let us face facts. People do not get gonorrhoea by waving to those who have the disease, or by drinking the same tap water, attending the same church or the same market. It is a disease that spreads through serious contact. And by serious contact here I mean that if a man who has it has sexual intercourse with a woman she will automatically have it. And if such a woman like Vicky who is infested with it comes along and

lures an unsuspecting man like me to have sexual intercourse with her, I cannot by any miracle of logic escape it. And a woman needs to be told in the business of sleeping with vagabonds to have V.D in the degree of passing it on with such dangerous ease that my most virtuous wife has passed it to me. Look at this lab report. It says plus, plus, plus. I don't know whether it means anything to you at all."

Silence.

"The explanation is simple. Vicky got her gonorrhoea from ceaselessly offering her body to people who had no concern for healthy bodies. If I were an Englishman I would call her by the name she deserves – an accomplished harlot. A washout. She is totally rotten."

Antony and Vicky spent the night on chairs in the parlour of their own house. Antony could not get himself to share the same bed with her after the doctor had confirmed that she was so heavily contaminated, and especially after what he had said to her. In fact he had expected that if she had any respect and love for herself she would understand his repulsion for her and pack out of the house.

On her part, Vicky did not seem to have any choice. She no doubt had a lot of love and respect for herself. But the solution as she saw it did not lie in her leaving the house. What would she tell those who would want to know why they were separated so soon? It was better to remain with him and bear the taunts until she was actually pushed out of the house.

Her endurance and patience only infuriated Antony still the more. He reasoned to himself that any girl who would still sit back by a man who had said all that to her was either too stupid or too careless with her public image. That was the more reason why he should not continue to regard her as his wife.

Early the following morning Vicky left for the hospital. She spent over a whole hour in the doctor's office and when she left the doctor gave specific instructions that when Antony came for his injections he should be asked to come and see him.

At 10 o'clock the doctor received word that Antony wanted to see him as he had requested. He prepared to receive him. When Antony came in and greeted, he did not answer his greetings. And when he attempted to sit down the doctor told him severely:

"Have the politeness to wait to be offered a seat, sir. It is common courtesy."

Antony was astounded. He withdrew to stand behind the empty chair on which he had sat the day before to outline his philosophies. The doctor again:

"Antony, or whatever you call yourself. If you have any holes in your head to hear with, listen to me for the very last time. Yesterday I spoke to you like one brother to another. I begged you and I advised you. I thought I was talking to a reasonable being. I thought you were as intelligent as you looked. But you have shown me that you are not. Today I shall warn you. I shall speak to you like the Senior Government Official that I am. A man whose duty in this state is to protect the lives of its citizens..."

"Can I know what I have done to merit..."

"You simply shut up your mouth, sir," the doctor ordered him like an infant.

There was silence.

"You are in danger of making a young girl whose father has just died commit suicide. Your wife will kill herself if you do not intervene. You yourself. Alone. And by intervention here I mean taking her back fully and unconditionally and immediately as your truly married wife. In spite of whatever may already have transpired."

A very uncomfortable silence fell. Antony had been leaning on his right leg. Now he shifted the weight to the left and stared on. Fear had replaced anger in his mind.

"Your wife was here this morning. In just a matter to a mere skeleton of what she was yesterday. In just a matter of hours. She would not eat, she would not drink, she would not sleep, just because you wouldn't too. You wouldn't share the same bed with her, because you think yourself a God. You have been transferred to teach in the North, and I should be the one to tell your wife about it. Your legally married wife! I shall appear in court again, not long from now, it seems, to give this evidence against you, if in the course of practicing your stupid philosophy you make this girl lose her life."

At this point he pressed a button on a tape recorder he had set working under a newspaper on his table as soon as I came in. He then took out a cassette on which he had recorded the message and showed him saying:

“That should tell you that it is no longer a laughing matter. It is no longer a matter of principles and blind philosophies. It is a real police case.”

It was only the doctor’s voice being recorded, and Antony had said nothing to incriminate himself. But he felt terribly threatened and the impact of the threat drove a current of fear through his whole body where he stood. He felt the muscles around his anus twitching ominously. At the same time he felt a thin current of very warm air trying to filter itself through the intricate convolution of his bowels that had instantly constricted with fright. Having lost all his reflexes in the instance, the current escaped before he thought of claspings his anus with his hands.

The nurse who sat just to his right turned with a start as crescendo of hissing between his legs ended up in a police explosion – pooooohhhmmm.

“I am sorry, doctor. I am very sorry please,” Antony apologized for the fart, overwhelmed with shame.

The doctor shrugged and looked away. After a long silence Antony tried to say something. The doctor cut in:

“That is all I called you here to tell you. If I am ever to listen to you, you must first return to and love your wife.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Antony reached home that morning from the hospital he forced himself to apologise to Vicky for all previous conduct towards her. He ascribed it all to alcohol which he said he had mistakenly taken on each of the two occasions that he had spoken so unkindly to her. He told her that he had completely forgiven her, and also asked her to pardon him. But he was not sincere for the move was motivated less by a genuine compunction than by a fear of the consequences now possible, should she kill herself. He had a dream to have his projected novel completed and published – while he was still alive and happy and free. He should not therefore allow that dream to be interrupted by any carelessness on his part. Any apology therefore, he thought, was not too much, if it was going to prevent Vicky from doing anything that would disrupt his own plans.

It was Vicky herself who sincerely believed in the “reconciliation.” And when she too apologized and begged him for pardon, saying that she had forgiven him, she meant every word of it. And for a while it looked as though they would be happy to live together once more as loving husband and wife, thanks to Eru.

The day following the apology the girl Janet whom Eru said he had met in Tetseale came to visit him as he had told Antony. The same evening Eru brought her to Antony’s house and, as he always said about a girl friend, he said she was his fiancée. She was a third year student in the Faculty of Education at the National University. That same evening too Eru suggested and insisted that they all go out for a drink in a night club.

Antony eventually agreed to take Vicky and go with them. And had his grievances against Vicky been lighter than they actually were, they would have completely reconciled on that occasion because Eru and Janet did everything imaginable that could arouse anxiety in lovers. They walked hand in hand in front of Vicky and

Antony, stopped at every pace and kissed and caressed each other. The scene tickled Vicky's sensibilities, and she moved closer to Antony each time the other were kissing. But Antony found it hard to respond. He only moved away, his hands clasped tightly behind him.

In addition, every new day only seemed to bring Antony a new cause of affliction. In the first place, Antony could never retrieve the insults he had showered so mercilessly on Vicky. And, even though neither of them mentioned them anymore, they hung in the air between them every second of their lives, and they could not forget. It was immaterial that they had apologized to each other: Vicky knew that Antony knew some hidden and bitter truths about her past life and had dared to voice them in public. Antony knew that he had told her his mind about her and was even surprised that she should take it so lightly.

And this was not all.

Janet and Eru came every evening to ask them to go to the night clubs to drink. But Antony did not think that he had either the stamina or the patience to stand the debilitating pace of entertainment. And these, he noticed were Vicky's most exciting moments. On the fourth occasion when they came he told Vicky that he would not go anywhere. Vicky looked very disappointed.

"Why Tony?"

"It's too much for me."

"But it's Eru who is paying," she pointed out. "He said he is ready to pay for the drinks for us every day."

"I have said NO. I am not going any more. Period."

That night they stayed at home with thoughts of leaving Vicky becoming most prominent once again in his mind. These were not unconnected with the outings. On the three occasions that they gone out, they had met with other young men and their wives or girl friends. And quite naturally conversations had cropped up on numerous subjects. On all these occasions he had found Vicky unbearably dull.

This was not entirely new to him. During the period of their engagement he had conversed with her on several issues, but he had never found her arguments deep and impressive. He had, however, imagined that she would change when they got to living together. She would be able to improve by copying his examples.

She would also be able to cultivate the habit of cracking a fine joke, keeping quiet when she had nothing reasonable to say, and acquire the ability to talk intelligently on intellectual issues.

Now he saw no such hope any more

In the light of what he now knew and thought and had even said about her, Vicky suddenly became unteachable. It seemed that she was at her best only when the topic of conversation bordered on sex. More than once, he had heard some other girls dismiss her contributions to conversations as “really childish”. And, in fact, Vicky did not behave in a manner which would impress the company at all. At least, that was the way he saw it. She would laugh at the most inappropriate moment while a joke was being told, just because the narrator had hinted that it was a funny story. And she would retell a joke somebody else had just told as though she had been the only one listening to it. And she would do so over and over again until nobody wanted to hear it, until she became the only one laughing.

On the contrary, Janet had completely won Antony’s heart by contributing intelligently to discussions on every topic under the sun. sometimes Antony even wondered secretly whether he was as well-informed as she was on some of the topics she handled confidently. Between the two there began to develop a feeling of mutual attraction. He too impressed her both by the attention he paid to her each time she spoke, and also by the answers he gave to questions she raised. But Vicky was never miserable at such moments. She found an apt companion in Eru who had endless tales to narrate, from the sexual activities of mosquitoes of those of elephants and pythons.

Janet went back after a week, leaving Antony wondering why he had not waited to marry a girl of her intellectual standing. Vicky, he resolved, was never meant to be his wife. She was not God’s choice as his wife. The proof of it was the series of problems that had arisen barely within one week of their marriage. To emphasize the fact, God had caused his transfer to the North to occur just at the moment when he looked in vain for an excuse to escape from her. He would not show God how stupid he was by not taking advantage of the divine intervention.

His days in Likume gradually came to an end. On that day of his departure Eru did not go to work. He came to join Antony and Nchindia who had come the day before. As soon as he received the news of his employment in the North Antony had written to Beckongncho and Nchindia. In both letters he had mentioned the day he was to leave Likume. Only Nchindia replied to say they would spend the last night in Likume together. He had kept his word.

In the company of Eru was a girl who said her name was Agie. Eru told them they were very related in that “the mother of her mother’s mother, lived in the same quarter with the mother of my own mother’s mother.” Antony knew she must have been one of his girlfriends. He was to travel by train to Komoro. This, according to directives he had received, was the shortest and most convenient route. At nine o’clock they took a taxi to the railway station, arriving there about ninety minutes too early.

Eru suggested that they go to the station bar “for the last drop” to while away time. There in the bar, Eru ordered beer and as they drank he decided to give Antony his last word.

“Bo, all jokes aside.” He began. “I was waiting to say this to you only today, and only at this hour. That is why I insisted that we should reach here so early.”

Everybody smiled, expecting a bawdy joke. He did not smile back. He told them he was very serious about what he was saying. He went on:

“Bo, Antony, let me know how you feel about working in the North. Do you like it? The place is all bush, and I know what button to press in Tetseale to make you transferred to any town you like if you get there and don’t like it.”

Antony was thoughtful for a very long time and then he said that it was too early to pass any judgment. In the end he said he did not hate it. He proceeded:

“If the North is bush, then it is the more reason why I should like it. That will give me an opportunity to exploit my potentials for human development. But the only thing which bothers me is why

the government has refused to use me profitably. An MSc in Political Science is not the best preparation for an English Language teacher...”

“No matter, bo. The English you are going to teach is not Sasse. Not I was. It is going to be just Good Morning, how are you? stuff. Even me I can teach that one.”

“But any kind of person could have been sent there...”

“No matter, bo. One man cannot be wiser than his country. If they have sent you there then it means they think it’s good for the country. Just go.”

“I am going, and cheerfully too,” Antony said.

“Fine. You may be thinking that because you have a degree and I have nothing, I cannot tell you what will help you. But that is wrong because I have worked long enough in this our system to advise a man like you. go to Sigili-Mundu. Work is work. I don’t know how old you college will be. But it is certainly not a Lycée as the name C.P indicates. The principal will certainly not be you.

“They call him director in French. Don’t ask why you have not been made the director when you know so much book. It is our country. I know that one day when you hear that I bribed and was made the director of a college somewhere you will curse God.

“Just go and do your works as you say you like work. If as you say the government is not using you well, use yourself well. Just combine with that your book. Write more and more. Only that you try to publish some so that we see them in the bookshops. Don’t only talk writing. But do not write politics because we do not want people like you who see too far. You have been calling all the ministers in this country empty sacks. Yet they are the sacks that are standing up and you are lying down, the full sack. Are you listening, bo Antony?”

“Every bit of it.”

“Good. Whatever increment you will get will depend on your relationship with your director. I fight with my boss here because I don’t care about increment. I get my money by hundreds of ways which you say you hate. If they sack me as Price Control Officer, I will bribe to become a Customs Officer. That too is still heaven. Your director is appointed by the government, so he will be the government there. See with him. Don’t ask him to see with you because it is not easy to see with you. That’s all I wanted to tell you. Chairs and tables,” he ended lifting his glass.

“Cheers!” they all concurred. Antony spoke again.

“Bo, Eru, I have heard what you have said. It will help me. I will only promise you that I won’t let you down...”

“Me?” Eru asked in a surprise which made his preceding advice sound like his usual jokes. “I am already down. He that is down needs fall no down. Promise not to let down yourself because you are the one who plans to change the world. And I hear,” he thought he should touch his favourite subject, “that the girls there dig like underground spiders. Free of charge too.”

“Don’t look at me,” Vicky warned him. “Don’t pour that your bad doctrine into my husband’s ear.”

A very long hearty laugh followed in which everybody else except Vicky participated. Vicky had not intended what she had said as a joke. She had spoken in deadly earnest. Antony had spoken very casually to her on plans to make her come and join him afterwards. He had not told her when that would be, or how. So even though he had apologized to her, she still had every reason to fear that Antony might be planning to desert her. Eru’s comment therefore was no joke as far as she was concerned. She was still expecting Antony to say something definite.

When the train whistled they left the bar and walked out. On the veranda outside, when Vicky saw that Antony would leave without telling her what she wanted to hear, she drew him aside and asked:

“Tony, so you are just going like that?”

“You mean going like that how, Vicky?”

“You have not said anything about my coming to meet you...”

“I will write you, Vicky. Trust me. I have to see the place first. Just exercise patience.” He gave her kiss on the jaw, shook hands with Nchindia, Eru and Agie and then went over to climb into the train.

The seats were mainly planks overlaid with waterproof sheets. There were not toilets! Woe betide you if it rained for there were no window panes. Half the passengers, bunches of sweaty, smelling human bodies which made Antony instantly nauseous, stood, clinging to an iron rod on the ceiling of their compartment.

This would be a different kind of train from that from Tetseale to Atule. The latter was more modern, and cleaner, perhaps because it carried less passengers. The passengers were nearly always Northerners.

A mischievous-looking little man called Eru from behind as he withdrew from the rest of the group.

"Massa, massa, I get some market tin for ya."

"What?"

The little man showed Eru a small bottle well-concealed under black cloth with a section well cut out to reveal some bright yellow—and-red capsules. They were antibiotics.

"I get my own for pocket. Two bottles," Eru told him.

The man laughed and turned away. Characteristically Eru thought he should crack a last joke. He called the little man back and just as Antony was placing his bag on a seat by the window from which he could wave good-bye to them all he called:

"Bo Antony, somebody wants to see you here-eh."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." Then he told the dealer to take his merchandise to Antony. Antony hurried back to the door and bent nearer the man, who whispered in his ears:

"Telemachine capsole sa. Meresin."

"For what?"

"Woman bisnet, sa. If to say massa sreep with woman wey get gonoleah, i cannot fit to cash you..."

Antony threw his head up and walked in without uttering a word. He stood at his place for one minute and then coming back to the door asked Eru very sadly:

"Bo, why did you do that?"

"What, bo?"

"Why did you ask that wretch to come to me?"

"Ah-ah, bo Antony, what is wrong? What is wrong with arming yourself in advance? After all do you know the sort of girls you will meet there? You have never seen such people in the parks before?"

"You say it is not serious?"

"I don't see it as serious at all. It is only serious to you."

"O.K. heh, small man," Antony called back the dealer and showed him where to sell his commodity: "Go to that tall woman there and sell it to her." He was pointing to Vicky who stood alone. She was still wondering why Antony had decided to leave her without making any plans for her stay back in Likume, and without telling her when she would join him. When the small man came up to her

she began to smile. She had seen Eru and Antony talk to the man. She therefore thought they had asked him to come and beg for money from her. The man explained his mission to her attentive ear:

“Madam, them say make I bring dis meresin for you.”

“Which meresin?”

“Meresin for sick, madam. If madam sreep with man wey get gonoleah or eny such kind tins, madam most tek wan capsole want tams for...”

she turned away from the man. Then very gently she turned towards Antony. Their eyes met. A tense minute of stupefied silence followed which was only broken by the departure of the train. To a couple that had nothing between them it was not a joke that could be borne easily. For Vicky and Antony it was fatal.

The train drove away without Antony waving. He would feel the weight of that sad note on which they had parted the whole length of the journey.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Antony arrived at Sigili-Mundu on the 8th of October, an unbelievable thirteen days after he left Likume. He had not been accurately informed about the precise nature of the journey. As if by some conspiracy all the Northerners he contacted in Likume for information about the place had lied! A man had told him that Komoro where he would get off if he took the train from Likume, was so near Sigili-Mundu that a gunshot in the one would frighten chickens in the other.

A second had said that the road between Komoro and Sigili-mundu was the finest in the country, and that the most regular bus and taxi systems linked the two towns. A third had told him that the road was tarred, and that he could even make the journey from Komoro to Sigili-Mundu on foot if he did not have much to carry, without feeling it, and in one day!

They had lied about the size of Sigili-Mundu, some said it had a municipal bus system and a telephone; others said it had a population of over one million inhabitants; that the college was situated in the heart of the prosperous city with street lights and a telephone service.

This was grossly untrue. Even while still in the train to Komoro he was told by several people that Sigili-Mundu was about 400 kilometres from Komoro. Precise figures were not available. 'The road might never have been tarred before,' he concluded. 'There was no such thing as a bus service. Only one bus plied the road – an old SAVIEM that was once used for transporting cattle. This lorry travelled only once a week, carrying more mechanics and spare parts than passengers. One of the ticket controllers in the train tersely described the journey from Komoro to Sigili-Mundu as a sport. He did not explain what he meant, but Antony would discover for himself.

He arrived at Komoro on September 30th. It was Wednesday, and he had left Likume on Saturday, September 20th. It had taken him four days to make the journey of 1000 kilometres. At the

Komoro-Sigili-Mundu park he learned at noon, that the lorry to Sigili-Mundu had left that morning. This was an immense setback for him because it implied that they would have to live in a hotel for the next one week. And he had not budgeted for that!

He spent the afternoon looking for a cheap hotel – he had started to adjust to the new state of affairs. He was eventually led to L'ETOILE DU NORD. He was told that it would cost him I2,000 francs for the week. It was a two-storey building with the upper floor still to be completed. The ground floor had six bedrooms. The rooms were supposed to be self-contained, but there was not water and so water had to be drawn from the well behind and put into buckets in each room.

Here he lived for six days. On Sunday, he discovered to his dismay that there was no church. There were no people going to church. When he learned that the people followed an entirely different religion from his, he prayed privately (he would do this during his entire stay in Sigili-Mundu).

He easily turned his disappointment into good by rewriting the novel he had begun. He wove the incident at the train station as he left Likume into the main story line and also decided to eliminate all the humorous sections of the book which his association with Eru had made him include. If he would portray life as he had seen it, there should be no humour whatsoever.

It rained twice very heavily while he was there. But when the lorry to take him eventually returned the weather was good. He left Komoro the following day, Tuesday. The new information he got about the nature of the road on board the train was no exaggeration. The people had even forgotten to tell him that when it rained the road could be blocked for days, and also that there were such gorges across the road that at certain places the passengers climbed down to push the lorry over.

For the first half of the journey, although he might very well have been riding a horse, there was no major problem. But at a place they called Babga, on the second day, they met with disaster. Their vehicle broke down and they had to spend the night there.

It was already 8 o'clock in the evening , and there was pitch darkness everywhere. One of the mechanics climbed up with a bush lamp to untie the loads and send them down to the passengers. These loads were mostly bundles of clothing wrapped in sleeping mats. Somewhere in the midst of all these was a can containing reserved petrol. By an accident the man who had gone up placed the lamp on the petrol can. It might not have been properly corked and so some of the liquid that had trickled out during the journey caused it to catch fire.

There was no means of extinguishing it. No sand, no water, nothing whatsoever. The fire extinguisher container which hung over the driver's seat had long been emptied of its original contents and carefully washed with hot water. It now contained "Akembe federal" or "haa," a locally brewed gin which the driver tested from time to time, to keep him awake as they made the journey. In fact, it was one of the first things to catch fire when the fire reached that part of the lorry.

Antony had been given the honour to sit in the front seat with the driver. He had sat there with his suitcase because the conductor thought it too new to be placed on the carriage with the rest of the loads. When they had been asked to wait while the driver to the lorry back, Antony had taken it down with him. But the box containing his books and has painstakingly prepared manuscripts was not so lucky. They had been tied on the carriage with the other small cartoons. Antony watched them all burn to ashes before his own eyes.

The loss of the manuscripts wrecked Antony's hopes and future ambitions because he knew he could never replace them. But the very next day, even as he travelled along, he began thinking, inventing and drafting several other stories which he hoped to weave into a novel. Just in the same way that he saw his transfer from Likume as a God-sent separation from Vicky, he saw in the loss the working of providence.

Babga was an old village. Its population hardly exceeded 200 houses were still built in clusters behind fences but the fences and walls were for the most part broken down, crumbling. And now

that he had decided not to write anything and to interest himself only in the people and their problems, he found them very friendly. This was very much contrary to stories of the “Wild north” that circulated in the South about the place. In the ramshackle hut of an old smith where he spent the night he was very well cared for. They brought him food and drink and were very anxious to converse with him about the South and his background. He was glad to answer them.

A “bed” was made for him – a mat of goatskin on the floor. He thanked them for their kindness, but too many things were militating against sleep. The goatskin was not yet thoroughly dry and so was still stinking offensively. The floor was rough and hard, and even if the skin was dry and the floor soft, there were enough mosquitoes around to make a man who was not used to them sit up the whole night to fight them. On top of all these there was the crucial problem on his mind of how to proceed from there to Sigili-Mundu.

The following morning, as he had convinced himself, the hand of God was at work again to guide him. A land rover, a very rare sight in the part of the country, suddenly appeared from the direction of Komoro. Out of curiosity he halted it. The driver was a Canadian Engineer who was on a survey mission for the Trans-African Highway. Three other white men were with him. They were also curious about Antony’s presence there, for he looked very different from any other person they had seen there in the North. He told them where he was going and what had happened to their lorry.

They said they were going to Sigili-Mundu and were very willing to take him along. In the land rover they had three puppies which they were to take eventually to another friend in the South. Antony had always loved dogs, and when he told them how lovely they were, they asked him to take one when he got to Sigili-Mundu. They said on important reason they were taking it down South was because there was a friend there who could take care of them rather than make a meal of them. Antony promised to take care of it. Then Antony inquired about the possibility of his school receiving help of any sort from the Canadian Government.

“You must be extraordinary,” one of the men who had introduced himself as Arnold Wiebe said.

“Why?” Antony asked.

The man laughed and said: "You have not even seen the school and you are so concerned with getting help? That's extraordinary to me. Are you from this part of the country?"

"Down South," Antony said. "I am from Small Monje, in Biongong."

The man shook his head in admiration and said:

"From my knowledge of the people of this country, people are usually not keen on helping the development of any are outside their village..."

"My heart beats for all," Antony said.

"On what subject are you asking for the books?"

"Any," Antony said.

Wiebe told him it was possible for them to get books because every year the libraries liquidated old books. He promised to follow up the project himself, gave Antony his card and asked Antony to write personally to the Rotary Club whose address he gave him. "Above all, keep in touch," he told Antony.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Antony's *Canadian* friends did not lead him to the residence of his principal, but they took him to the park and waited until somebody was found who could show him the way. It was just beginning to get dark. He knocked at the door once, but there was no answer. He knocked a second and a third time. He could hear movements within, but no one answered. He was just about to knock again when the door suddenly swung open.

A large bald head appeared before him which made Antony tremble. He was heavily built, with a massive bare skull that rose sharply from the back and then descended gradually into a valley before rising slowly and then tumbling over his roundish he-goat-like fore-head. His facial features were extremely harsh, even in the semi-darkness. The lines above his wide-expressive eyes seemed carved into a permanent frown.

His head was clean shaven but it was obvious that he simply wanted to disguise an obvious baldness by shaving all the hair. Nevertheless, he had not completely succeeded because a contour of hairs of a few days ran above his ear and round the back of his head. His nose was short and stunted with nostrils that almost turned upwards. His mouth was rather small for his bulk and flanked by two thick lips with the lower lip protruding in an almost comical manner.

There was no such thing as a neck because it was simply a thick lump of flesh that rose from inside the shoulders to a good distance up into the back. He lisped in speech, partly because of a missing tooth or the thickness of his lips. He breathed heavily and each time the breath left his mouth the air stank foully. He looked Antony straight in the eye and seemed to pierce through him with the gaze.

"C'est quoi?" a voice inquired through serious-parted lips. The way he twitched his lips and nose when he talked gave off the odd impression that he was in the presence of some offensive odour. Antony was silent, staring fixedly at the aggression in his face.

"Good evening, sir," he stammered.

"Evening," the man snarled back. He seemed to reflect for a moment. Then looking at Antony again, his severe expression relaxed into a momentary grin. "Come into the insight," he said.

Antony stepped in, his puppy in his left hand and his suitcase in the other. As soon as the door was shut behind him the man growled:

"Ei teck it that you eur Enteny Nk...Nk..."

"I am, sir," Antony came to his aid. "Antony Nkoaleck is my name." He was glad his boss spoke some English.

"Sit don prease," he pointed to a chair by the dining table. Then he rang a small bell on the table in front of his own seat in the centre of the floor. Moments later two big girls came in from behind the house. At the same time two boys too came in from outside. He gave others for the stranger's valise and puppy to be taken into the visitor's room.

"Do you speak zhe Frensh?" the man inquired unsmiling.

"Not at all, sir. I have just returned from overseas. But I expect to be able to speak it within the next few months."

The man was imperceptibly offended by the answer. He had expected Antony to say no, and to say he could not because it was a very difficult language. He was not interested in knowing how far he had travelled. It was an unnecessary piece of arrogance. After all French was spoken overseas too!

"You will be zhe professeur d'anglais," the man seemed to announce.

"Yes, sir," Antony had been careful to notice the omission of MR. when the man called his name. But he found himself, without knowing why, stressing the SIR when he answered the man. Professor! Antony thought with inward amusement. The French will always remain ridiculous with their love for inflated titles. Of course he could as easily have become a professor of the university had employed him.

"Ei em Zaché Azangma," the man introduced himself rather belatedly. "Ei em zhe directeur ef zhe college."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir," Antony too said, trying to rise as ceremony usually required, so that they shake hands. But the man did not stir a muscle. He turned away from Antony as soon as he called his own name. As though he had just been trying to put his chair in order Antony fidgeted and sat back with a slight tinge of humiliation.

With the same coldness Zaché reached for a file on the shelf behind him which he threw open and studied for a couple of minutes. Then shutting it again he announced:

“We heve bin specting you fer one mont.” His words fell with measured reluctance, an air of deadly calm seemed to exude from the silence between every utterance.

Antony did not know whether it was meant as an ordinary remark or as a blame. He decided it was the latter and said:

“It is true, sir I encountered a lot of difficulties. I had spent a whole week in Komoro. Besides I did not know that the school had already begun here. The system here seems to be different from that in the South.”

“Evrytsingz hieur iz defferend frem sout. Zheur wez a meur shorteur route by Atule.”

“I never knew that sir.”

Zaché said nothing. He only got up and went to the shelf from which he took out another file. He pulled out several sheets of papers, fitted carbon paper in between them and fitted them into his typewriter. Then he began typing in silence. When he had finished he pulled out the sheets, stamped them and handed three copies to him. Antony took them and stared uncomprehendingly:

MINISTRE DE L'EDUCATION NATIONALE
ENSEIGNEMENT SECONDAIRE GENERAL

Sigili-Mundu.

Le 8 October, 1964

COLLEGE PRINCIPAL DE SIGILI-MUNDU
B.P 123 PROVINCE DU NORD

OBJET: UNE DEMANDE D'EXPLICATION ADRESSEE
A MR. ANTONY
NKOALECK – PROFESSEUR D'ANGLAIS.

Mr. Antony Nkoaleck;

Vous étiez absent de votre post depuis le 2 Septembre, 1964. Veuillez me donner, et en triple exemplaires, les motifs de votre absence dans les 24 heurs qui suit la reception de cette demande.

Zaché Azangma
Directeur
C.P de Sigili-Mundu

It was Greek to Antony.

"Is it a letter of assumption of duty?" he inquired.

"Zhe quiry. Iz zhe quiry," Zaché said. "Zhe minister most heve to know zhat you weur not in college frem during 2 Septembre."

"A query?"

Zaché did not answer.

"In what language am I going to write it?"

"In eny kendz of lengluege," Zaché said sourly.

"What does the query demand in any case?"

Zaché explained to him.

"And when am I expected to give you back?"

"Tomorhow. Befo zhe night."

Antony could not argue. He had come there to work, to do his job very well. Eru had advised him well. He did not even know whether that was the usual procedure. He sat down and spent the next hour elaborately explaining the reasons for the delay as honestly as he could. When he was satisfied with what he had written he signed the three copies and handed them over to Zaché. Then he thought it would be necessary to know in a general way about the life in the place. He began:

"For how long have you been her, sir?"

Zaché did not answer him. To open a conversation with his boss so soon after answering a query indicated, Zaché thought, how very lightly he took it. It proved, besides, how very disrespectfully he was going to treat his boss.

Antony thought he had not heard him.

"Have you been here long, sir?" he asked very slowly.

"Seven montz."

Antony looked at him and then away. "What is the place like?" he asked.

"Prease?" Zaché titled his ear towards him.

"The place. How is life here?"

"Zheur iz no life hieur."

Antony thought he had not framed the question properly. He broke it down:

"Is food as available as we have in the South?"

"Zheur iz no foot hieur. Everytsingz comz frem zhe sout."

"What of accommodation? Are houses good? Easily available?"

"No houfiz. Only zhe boxiz ef zhe mut. Without no vindowz. Zhis house iz lek zhiz bicoze iziz zhe government house."

"Ant the social life? How are the people like?"

although he had been very kindly treated in Babga, Antony did not want to conclude that that was how all the people of the North behaved. Sigili-Mundu was very long way from Babga and so there was bound to be a difference. Zaché, he felt, had been there long enough to be able to give him some first hand information.

"Zheur iz no life. No social life. Zhe people eur viry wicked. All ef zhem eur tsievz. Zhey hate zhe strangeurz to nonsense. All zhe deadly poisonz in bleck Africa eur made hieur. Zhey kill you ef zhe slightest provocation. All zhe women hieur eur full of zhe vinireal sicknez."

Antony shuddered and immediately changed the topic.

"What of the school?"

"Preaze?"

"How big is the school? The college."

"Iz sisième. We heve seventeen-five pipels."

"Seventy-five?"

Zaché nodded.

"How many boys and how many girls?"

"No boyz. No girlz. Only zhe men and zhe women.

"Fifteen men. Twentyeen women."

"How man teachers?"

"Only you. I tish too."

"Is it near the house here?"

"Viry far. Fo kilometers long."

"Does the village have a vehicle?"

"Notsing. Notsing."

"I'd be damned," Antony exclaimed. "Does it have a library?"

"Notsingz."

There was silence. Then Antony said:

"Then one will spend all his money on taxis..."

“No taxiz hieur. You eur in zhe nort. Only zhe cowz end zhe donkeys.”

“Good thing I had already made plans for books to be shipped from Canada,” he said.

“These people must be really suffering!” Antony interjected.

“Zhey doesn’t soffeur. Only zhe strengeurz soffeur hieur. Iz a viry bad prace to work in,” Zaché summed up the talk of the evening.

There was silence.

The man could only be tempting him, Antony thought. The principal of a college who took his duties so seriously as to give his only member of staff a query on the very first night of his arrival, could not be sincere in any condemnation of the place.

“It really depends, sir, on the individual,” Antony said. He was careful not to make it sound like he was contradiction his boss. “Personally it will give me an excellent pleasure to see them develop in my hands from scratch. There is no other way of assessing one’s achievements. Since it is in the first year, and I will be their first English teacher, whatever they will come to say about English will depend on how I shall work with them. I have the moral obligation to give them my best. First impressions are always very important. At least from my own point of view. I have already made very strong contacts with overseas authorities to supply us books on all sorts of subjects for a library. So you see that in one important sense it is a very good place to work in.”

Antony looked into Zaché’s face. The expression was one of displeasure. Zaché felt that it must be his own judgement of the people and the place that was correct. An “anglo” had no right to contradict him.

The displeasure on his face was quite in order, even if Antony did not know it. This anger suited Zaché’s disposition. Zaché also had a very special grudge against the North and all that it stood for. He had a grudge against life, which lay deep in the fact that he came from the Kombo tribe of the South-East. The Kombos were second only to the Northerners as the largest single tribal unit. They were a hard working people, provided most of the country’s intellectuals and prominent businessmen. Yet, for twenty-five years they had sat back to watch the Northerners rule the country. And by their own estimates, the Northerners were as stupid as the cattle

they drove down to the coast, and so did not deserve any right to control the destinies of a nation in which the Kombos were a major part. They never stopped looking for an opportunity to seize power.

Zaché's transfer to the North, was direct result of an abortive attempt by the military to take over power, led by some officers from his home town. The officers involved were executed and the civilians who were said to have been directly implicated in it were given very long prison sentences. The rest of the Kombos like Zaché who in the opinion of the government could encourage another conspiracy, were scattered to distant corners in the country.

A second complication had to do with the unification of the two former French and English territories. The relationship between the "anglos" and the "francos" or "frogs" as the Anglophones called them disparagingly, had never been cordial. They treated each other with mutual scorn. Since they could never aspire to political power, the "anglos" minority, by virtue of their upbringing were peace-loving. With them it did not matter who ruled the country. It was enough that there was peace and prosperity. In so doing they soon came to be regarded as cowards or worse still outright traitors, as they would not ally with any of the disgruntled tribes to put an end to the hegemony of the North.

Zaché had not forgotten, nor was ever likely to forget the rumour that was widely in circulation soon after the plot miscarried, that they had been betrayed by a Kombo who had grown up among the "anglos". If that plot had succeeded, he might have been compelled to render his service to the same people who had deliberately destroyed all his political ambitions. He hated the North and by implication hated anybody who showed any liking for the place. Antony, a veritable traitor had been sent to work under him. The battle lines were drawn.

Chapter Thirty

Before Antony went to bed that first night he had been told that classes began 8 o'clock every morning. At half past six the following day he was up. Twenty minutes later he was dressed for school. Zaché was not to appear until half-past eight. He came out of his room in pyjamas and told Antony that he would be taking his children to the "infants' garden" (which turned out to a nursery school) at 9 o'clock. On his return, he said they would then go to see the authorities of the town. By authorities here he meant the Senior District Officer whom they called the "*Prefet*", the Medical Officer, and the Traditional Ruler whom they called the "*Lamido*".

When Zaché eventually left Antony went out to stroll round his large compound. There were some labourers digging holes and cutting grass. Their look struck him as people from the South. He went up to them and inquired. He was right. They were Southerners who had spent most of their lives in Sigili-Mundu. They were very happy to hear that he too was from the south, and that he was coming to teach English.

They told him that it was very great pride to have him there because the "directeur" had created the impression that he was the only and most educated man from the south. Whey they asked him where he studied he told them that it was the white man's country where electricity washed his body and combed his hair. Here he knew he was just cracking a joke. He knew that it would sound ridiculous in the ears of any right-thinking man. He did not actually expect to be believed, and expected them to express some surprise or ask him to explain what he meant.

But did not. Instead, when he asked about housing, he was told that there were several built by the government, but that there was only one he could live in – one with electricity.

One of the men, a carpenter, led him to the house that contained electricity and they inspected it. The man told him that the electricity had not yet been connected because he had not yet come. He said he would talk to the *Prefet* about it.

When Zaché returned they had breakfast: three large loaves of bread were served in a basket. Zaché took two, cut one into two and gave Antony one half. There were five boiled eggs. Zaché took four and gave Antony one. he actually opened the tin of Nescafé and measured half a teaspoon which he put in Antony's saucer beside two loaves of sugar. Antony was still on his first cup of coffee when Zaché emptied his fourth and ordered them to leave.

They were going for the "presentation" as Zaché called the trip to see the authorities. They were to begin with the *Prefet*.

"Look et hieur" Zaché pointed to either side of the road as they ploughed through the dusty street. Ugly clusters of must huts in the last stages of dilapidation, slumped, each one half-hidden behind the other as if ashamed to show its face. Here and there in front or behind a hut, a gutter rose and disappeared again, reeking and fuming with the excess of human and animal waste. Here and there were children, already past school-going age, buried in dust-ridden verandas or in stinking muddy gutters, lost in amusements for infants of two or less! Adults, the sick, the blind, the healthy, clung together on every veranda, either striking down and bruising their foreheads in endless prayer, or playing cards over which they cursed obscenely, and even fought.

"Zhey eur zhe viry fooliss end lezy peuplz," Zaché growled, cleared his throat and spat out a vicious glob of accumulated mucus on the dust as they went on. Antony made no comment. He instead thought of his needy tribesmen back home in Small Monje. He tried to understand the North for the first time, and com pare it with the South. The first thing he noticed about the place was its peculiar slaughterhouse smell. Everywhere he went the stench of half-decaying, half-dried, or even wet hide and skin hung in the air. It was not as busy as city as Likume, even though it might have been the same size and might also have contained the same number of inhabitants.

But except for a few petty traders (mainly Southerners) along the road sides and corners, one never saw much of the population. It lay hidden behind mud enclosures. It was hard at the time to tell whether they were friendly people or not. They were either praying, dragging cattle to the slaughter houses, sunning hides and skins or sitting on the verandas. If he saw little of the men, he saw even less of the women. They were all hidden behind the enclosures which they called *Sarés*. There were not streets, and houses were not built in straight lines as in South. As they passed there could be heard sounds of some pounding mortars. It could have been corn or millet or rice they were pounding, he could not tell. The laterite tracks of roads were untarred and uncared for. But they did not have the type of pot holes and mounds of earth in the centre of the road like he had left in Likume.

The dress of the men also interested him. In the heat of all the scorching sun, s he started noticing from Komoro, they wore very thick and heavily embroidered gowns and turbans which left only their faces exposed. They all smelt of strong perfume. He saw very little of the women except a few young girls who went about selling a cane-like substance they called “kwirikwiri.” It was a mixture of roasted fried groundnuts and corn ground.

The houses were no better than most of the huts in Small Monje, and the children too who spent their youth in gutters instead of school reminded him of his youth until he left for Likume with Anuse. He felt tied to their needs.

They passed through the Post Office where Zaché told the Post Master about the new teacher. The Post Master's name was Saminou, and Zaché introduced Antony to him as a stranger who did not understand their language and who spoke only English.

Saminou, cheerful-looking, middle-aged, short and with very thick fingers, was so excited by the news that he closed the Post Office, asking everybody who had come there to go away. He was one of the very few Northerners in Sigili-Mundu who had gone to school, and the only one who knew a few words in English. He was always anxious to speak to them. When Zaché arrived at Sigili-Mundu he soon made it known that he was perfectly bilingual. This excited the curiosity of Saminou who also passed for a fluent speaker in English and French. He visited Zaché a good number of times and tried to make him converse with him in English. But the contempt

that Zaché had for the “anglos” would not allow him to use that tongue as a form of entertainment. It was not exactly English he spoke, as Antony noticed, but an odd mélange of raw pidgin and some stray words of grammar. It was hard to understand him, but once in a while Antony grasped the general idea. It was he who now led the way to the *Prefet's* office.

The *Prefet*, El Hadj Abdu-Rhamann, stood up, took off his cap, and took Antony's hand which he shook, released, struck his chest, seized it again and shook. This he did four times, an indication that the stranger was very welcome. He was tall and dark with reddish lips. He wore a sparkling white gown and a gold watch. He spoke with enormous humility and friendliness. But Antony dismissed him in his mind instantly as very dull. As soon as the ritual was over, and even before Antony took his seat where he was shown, Saminou began an epic narrative of the various places he had visited himself in the English-speaking world – Lagos, Kaduna, Nigeria, Ghana, Kumasi, Buea and the Gambia. He has a curious habit of ending his utterances with:

“You now” or “You now waramin?”

To this Antony would say:

“I sure do,” occasionally giving him a handshake to applaud his exploits. In fact, it became hard to tell whether it was Antony who had come to be introduced or Saminou.

All this while Zaché remained disdainfully silent. He had not brought Antony there out of courtesy, or to fulfil any administrative obligation. If he left Antony to go about his job without any introduction, nothing would happen to him. If he were given a query he would not lack something to say. He had brought him there so that he should see how very stupid the people were.

The building housed many government departments – finance, health, and customs. People came from the entire administrative block, some late-comers even climbing on to the *Prefet's* window, staring tongue-tied at Saminou conversing with the “professeur d'anglais” on the very first day. The *Prefet* was forced to interrupt him to ask Antony whether he liked to be in Sigili-Mundu.

Zaché spoke for him. After translating the question he told Antony to let them know that even if he did not like the place there was nothing he could do about it because he was forced to be there until he was transferred elsewhere. Antony took his time and began:

"Tell him that I like Sigili-Mundu very much because I like to bring up people. Tell him that my stay and work here will give me an opportunity to contribute my own quota to the building of this country into the unified whole that is being intended. Tell him that..."

Zaché whose malevolent stare had failed to silence him, barked that it was enough. As though it was only a sign of encouragement he paused and then continued almost in the same breath:

"Tell him that I hear the people of Sigili-Mundu are not as educated as those of the South, but that as far as English is concerned, I will try to raise their standards to those of the South. I have already discussed the problems of the school with my Canadian friends and they are going to send us books to open the biggest college library in the whole country."

It was Saminou who translated. He did not have the same problem understanding English as he had speaking it. But he made one fatal error. He translated "Library" not as "Bibliothèque" but "Librairie." Although the two words sounded almost the same, his translation was wrong. He said books were coming with which Antony was going to use to open the biggest bookshop for colleges. This misinterpretation Zaché would use at the appropriate moment to hurt Antony's designs.

When he finished the translation a smile of contentment took shape on the *Prefet's* lips. Zaché had withdrawn to the veranda, and was discussing the weather with some natives from one of the offices. The *Prefet* looked at Antony for a very long time and then asked Saminou to tell him that they had heard him well, and that he would use his position to do everything to help him achieve that goal. Then he asked Saminou how the English say "we promise to help."

"We plomess to helep you," Saminou told him.

Abdu-Rhamann nearly choked trying to pronounce the words which stuck in his throat, even after five attempts. But Antony liked the effort. Abdu-Rhamann called for Zaché and spoke to him. He said it was regrettable that all the teachers sent there had refused to come, but that if Allah could send just another teacher with the kind of spirit and determination he had divined in Antony, the sea would reach sigili-Mundu. The belief was common among the Northerners that the Southerners were enlightened because they lived near the sea.

Zaché nearly burst with inward amusement at the absurdity of their wishes. When Antony asked him what the man had said Zaché said he would tell him later. He was never to do so.

Before they finally left Antony told the Post Master to tell the *Prefet* that if they co-operated with him as they had said, before he left Sigili-Mundu, they would all be able to speak English as he did because he had already arranged for books. Zaché said they should leave that point for another day. But Saminou could not be restrained. He ran and told him that the “professeur” had said that if they helped him, before he left Sigili-Mundu, they would be able to speak English like him the Post Master. It was not an accurate translation.

For Antony the trip had been a personal as well as a professional triumph. It had given him the opportunity to sort of take the temperature of the people on whose land he was going to work. For some inexplicable reason Zaché had become so offended with him that he declined to go to see the Medical Officer and the *Lamido* as he had promised. But the story would hardly have differed. From the few he had met, the thermometer indicated a few important points: the people looked friendly at heart, did not pretend about their backwardness, and looked determined to learn, in spite of their dullness. If they were wicked and hated strangers “to nonsense”, if they manufactured the most deadly poisons in black Africa, there was nothing in those few he had seen which betrayed that respect of their nature. This was more than he needed to give him the impetus to work. He wrote to the Canadian Rotary Club and had the letter posted that same day.

For Zaché it had been a mordant and unpardonable humiliation, even if Antony did not know it. It was an attack on the reputation he had always guarded with very great cunning. A boastful “anglo” had said what he quite remembered never saying on the very first day of meeting the authorities. Never even afterwards! The traitor had deliberately done so to create the impression to the public that he was better suited for the task of an educator than a “franco”!

They had arrived at Sigili-Mundu in the night and so even though the driver of the Canadian Jeep had pointed to the school as they drove past he had nodded without seeing anything. After trekking for one hour they arrived at a signboard: COLLEGE PRINCIPAL DE SIGILI-MUNDU. An arrow pointed right towards a laterite track of a road. Antony looked across the landscape and saw an unpainted, longish, isolated structure located at about half a kilometre away.

"Zhat iz zhe college," Zaché announced carelessly. They turned and trudged on for twenty more minutes. From the distance they could see students running about. As they approached the building grew bigger and longer as the number of students running about outside reduced. Finally they arrived the campus proper. College Principal de Sigili-Mundu was very uninspiring. It was a single building with only one door open. There were three other classrooms with doors sealed. There was also a staff room and the Director's office.

There was evidence of further construction work to be carried out: sand and stones were piled in heaps, so also were logs of timber.

Zaché marched into the class, and stood in front of the students.

"Bonjour monsieur," they greeted.

Zaché held his hand over his ear and leaned towards them, implying that there was some error in the greeting. They greeted again and again until they finally said:

"Bonjour messieurs."

He sighed, pointed to Antony and said "C'est votre nouveau professeur. Il enseigne l'anglais." He then walked out without calling his name to the students.

As soon as Zaché went out Antony ordered the students to sit down. There was not the slightest movement. Those were the very first English words the students had heard. They therefore made not sense to anybody.

"Damn," he cursed. "Please sit down," he repeated, gesturing with his hands like a choir conductor.

Guessing what he meant, and each in his own turn, they began very apprehensively to place their buttocks on the benches. When they had all sat down he ordered:

"Stand up, everybody," again gesturing with his hands. They rose, more out of imitation. He ordered them to sit down, stand up, sit down and then stand up again. Then, while they were still standing up he decided to tease them. He ordered them in a loud voice: "Stand up, everybody!"

Half the class sat down. He feigned disappointment by throwing up his hands into the air. But he was still wearing a smile. There was guarded laughter as those who had sat down began to steal themselves back into standing positions again. In the end there was only one person still sitting down – one very small boy in the front seat. Antony walked up to him and tapping him on the forehead with a folded magazine said in a comically sharp voice: “Malam Alhadji, stand up.”

The students were unable to contain their mirth. They had been silently amused as soon as they noticed that some of their mates had made a mistake. But they dared not show it. Zaché had warned them from the very first day that school was no laughing matter. Fools like themselves, he said, had no reason whatsoever to show their teeth in class.

But at the mention of those two words – “Malam” and “Alhadji” there was a sudden burst of uproarious laughter. The two words were used commonly and indiscriminately in the South to address any body from the North. Among the Northerners themselves, however, they had very specific application. A “Malam” was a title reserved only for teachers in the Arabic schools, and those who were so well-versed in the Koran as to be able to give lectures on it to the young and uneducated. “Alhadji” too was a title borne only by those whose faith in the teachings of Mohammed and the Koran had taken them as far as Mecca on a pilgrimage.

But for Antony these details were very unnecessary. He thought he had seen a “Malam Alhadji” because he saw a boy with a white jumpa, the characteristic attire of Northerners as he had always known them. But in the eyes of the listeners, the absurdity of calling a boy of that age those titles, was an irresistible piece of humour. The more so because this was actually the first time they had ever found something to laugh at in class. They were therefore determined to compensate for all the months of deprivation.

There was an even deeper cause of laughter. Besides being the youngest in class (he was seventeen) the boy was by far the dullest. Antony later learnt that his name is Umaru. He was one of the “*Lamido's*” sons and had been withdrawn from the primary school and put into college. A college could not be established in his kingdom without the *Lamido's* own children in it.

Cat-like, Zaché had crept from his office to the window and the students were still laughing and drumming when he reared his head. A hush fell over the class again, and they immediately folded their hands and sat up. When they were silent Zaché walked into the classroom and called out the names of four students he said he had personally caught shouting. These he asked to follow him to his office.

There he asked them to lie down on their bellies. This they did. Then with whip of well-dried leather he lashed them 12 strokes each on their buttocks. One of the culprits was a girl of 20. Whether it was the result of the impact of the brutal beating or an unfortunate coincidence, at the 10th stroke she menstruated. This threw the college into confusion because when she got up her whole dress and the portion of the floor where she lay was messed with blood. Antony's first lesson so well begun ended abruptly. Covered with the loin cloths borrowed from other girls she was rushed to the dispensary where some first aid administered.

Antony thought it was wrong. He did not believe in corporal punishment. Even if he did, no principal had the right to stroll into his class and drag out students and beat like beasts. He would warn Zaché about it. He would encourage the parents of the children to make a case against Zaché. If they were as wild as Zaché had claimed, then that was an opportunity to show it. Even animals fight back when their young are attacked or hurt! Such an attitude was detrimental to the engendering of the spirit of education in a place as remote as Sigili-Mundu.

What he did not know was that in the thousand and one versions of the story which went into the villages his name became tied up with the punishment as though it was he himself who had beaten the children.

Zaché knew how to defend himself. His explanation to the enraged parents later that day was as ingenious and as wicked as his vicious mind could devise. He told them it was his new teacher's first day in class, and that the man had to interrupt his lesson to bring the girl to his office for openly insulting him. And it was this new teacher who had prescribed that inhuman punishment of 12 strokes of the whip. He found it hard to resist satisfying his only teacher on that first occasion. But he would advise the man to be more tolerant next time. He apologized for the blood which he said was merely accidental.

But this he did not know at all. He simply went about his job as honestly and as diligently as he could. Within a few days of his arrival he could give simple orders in English without any fear of not being understood. And the fact that he made the students feel very free with him generated in them an enthusiasm which compelled them to want to speak the language like him. When on the third day he reported his success to his boss Zaché's interpretation was different. Antony could claim he was succeeding with them only because he did not want to begin with the difficult exercises.

Chapter Thirty-One

Antony described Zaché in his dairy as “the most pernicious little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” One thing was now very certain: the two of them could not work well together. Zaché certainly had quite a different attitude towards his work and towards the people. He was not anxious to see them improve. But he remained his boss, to whom all important questions regarding the school should ultimately be addressed. The conversation of Zaché to sanity was therefore a priority if the school was to take off the right way.

He attended school for one whole week and then decided to make a few observations to his boss. The first concerned the students’ use of their free time. They were the only two teachers available, and he could teach only English. Zaché too never spent more than an hour in school, although, being French speaking, he was supposed to help the students in the other subjects for which teachers were not yet available. And it was a rule that these students had to come to school at 8 o’clock, remain until noon then come again at 3 o’clock and then leave at 5 o’clock. These were instructions contained in a Ministerial circular concerning study programmes in all government colleges. Zaché made a fetish of sticking to rules from the Ministry, especially when application hurt the people around him.

Antony had decided to teach two hours of English in the morning and two in the afternoon. There were several other free periods, including those assigned for Physical Education. He thought he could take up these hours. When he asked Zaché what the students had been doing during those periods he said:

“Notsingz. No cowz fer zhem to drive. Zhey eurr

“Why don’t we get them say a football? Then we also arrange for them to dig a playground? They are already men, and are strong enough to do that.”

“Zhey cannot to be ebel to play anytsinggz et all. Heve you eueur heurd zhat a team frem zhe nort hes beaten a team frem zhe sout?”

Antony thought he had been misunderstood. He pointed out:

"I am really not talking of first division games sir. Just something for them to kick about for exercise only. We the English believe that much work and no play makes Jack a lazy boy. We could get somebody to weave a net for volleyball..."

"Zhat will be doing zhe jobz ef somebody else," Zaché said. "Zhe gouvernement sent a sportmasteur. Bot he refused not to arrive. If he iz hieur zhen he cen be ebel to occupy wit zhat. Ei cannot be ebel to come hieur in zhe bush end begin to spend my money on sush tsingz. Zhe gouvernement bez to provite zhe equipments fer zhiz college."

Perhaps Zaché was just being miserly, Antony thought. He himself was very poor. But he managed to squeeze 700 francs from his very tight food budget with which he bought a large rubber ball. He gave it to the class prefect to take to school the following day. The morning session of the English classes ended at 10. as Zaché was absent the students decided to organize a small game on the lawn in front of the school building.

About one hour afterwards Zaché arrived. Antony was sitting in the classroom and working on his manuscripts when he heard Zaché call for the ball. He went out and told Zaché that he was the one who gave them the ball. Zaché repeated his orders as though Antony had not spoken, and one boy brought the ball up to him, swearing in the name of Allah that it was the "professeur d'anglais" who brought it and gave it to them. Zaché took the ball, drew a pen-knife from his pocket and, giving it to the boy asked him to tear the ball into pieces.

The boy promptly obeyed. Antony received the act as though the knife was piecing through his very heart. He turned away in anguish. What crime had he committed in offering the boys the ball? And even if he had committed a crime. Could Zaché not see the injury he was on his reputation? He stood for a while and then went into Zaché's office to inquire what he had done wrong. Zaché said:

"Mr. Entony, ei know what iz good fer zhe nort. If you give zhem zhiz ball and ez zhey eur playing lek zhat, a student brokez hiz legz, who will be ef zhe responsibility? Ei told you so before."

"Let's get the facts right, sir" Antony began, "this complaint is new to me. When I raised the point with you the other day you gave me to believe that it was a question of finance. And you talk now of children breaking their legs and the like. Even if the Minister of Sports came here to supervise games, I don't see how that will minimize the possibilities of accidents. I don't see how this will make an accident less serious. To the best of my knowledge, I don't think Scotland Yard will want to know whether the ball was made by a local blacksmith or by the Prime Minister himself. The source of the ball ought not blind us to the overall intention which is just to give the students some diversion from the tedium or boredom of..."

"Mr. Entony, ei sey NO. You heve no right to shooze what iz good fer my studentz."

And there the matter ended. The gulf between them had thus widened. Zaché was incorrigible, he concluded. But he would not allow the college to die before his own eyes. He would seek means to save the institution. To save the institution meant taking or sending Zaché away. The Northerners were very strongly represented in the government. He would speak to the *Préfet* and the *Lamido*. He would tell them to use their influence in government to save their college by getting rid of the serpent, Zaché. Meanwhile he would continue to work as hard as he could.

The college had no latrine, no urinal, no drinking well. He wanted to know from Zaché what plans he had envisaged for these major problems.

"Zhey eur all viry bush," Zaché told him for the 50th time.

"Zhey lek to suffer viry mush."

"But it is not their problem alone," Antony said. "It is ours too. Imagine that you are teaching and suddenly develop a running stomach. It could be very embarrassing to rush out into this open field and squat in the full view of your students. Thank God that the days of cholera are over. These are not things which take the level of your civilization into account when attacking you. Besides, a teacher needs water to wash his hands after a lesson. See the ages of the students. They are all adults as you pointed out. We ought not to do anything to embarrass either them or ourselves.

Zaché saw no sense whatsoever in this. He carefully reiterated his condemnation:

“Ei heve told you zhat zheze people don not know anytsingz et all. Zhey most be left to soffreur like zhat. Not oeur trouble. Ei sent all zhe list of tsingz ei want for zhiz college to Tetsale. Since zhen zhey heve not said anytsingz. We most heve to wait. Zhatz all.”

“It’s not all sir.”

Silence.

“We have to wait for how long?”

“Iz not my worry. Zhey heve to answeur my demande feurst.”

“So while waiting you don’t even think we could get local labour to dig us a latrine and a well, then we debit the government when the time comes?”

“Nno.”

“You don’t think we can ask these students themselves to bring palm fronds or we get some old pieces of zinc to put up a urinal behind the class?”

“Nno.”

“We cannot even get students to contribute money and buy a bucket and arrange for the girls to fill the buckets in the class in turns?”

“Ei sey nno,” Zaché told him decidedly. “Ei em zhe directeur of zhiz college. Not you.”

“Why don’t you boil the college and eat to show that it is your father’s personal property which you inherited?” Antony blasted and walked out. The rift between Antony and his boss was now complete.

Antony brought up the latrine and well problem at 10 o’clock on Thursday. He was still living in Zaché’s house at the time, and it was exactly fifty-five days since he arrived at Sigili-Mundu. In the French news at 3 o’clock that same afternoon a new development took place in the administration of the college. By a Prime Minister Arrêté a “Surveillant General” was appointed for the college. The man was Antony Nkoaleck! By the same order, three teachers who were currently teaching in the primary schools in town were

transferred as ordinary “surveillants” to assist the “Surveillant General” in his new responsibilities in College Principal de Sigili-Mundu – two men and one woman.

Zaché never went to school until he had listened to the afternoon news. He was still lying in bed that afternoon when the announcement was made. He woke as if he had suddenly uncovered a plot to overthrow him. He had taught with the government for eleven years before being made a “Surveillant General”. This office he held for the record period of four years before being made what he was at the moment – “Directeur.” He had been this for the past seven years, and the contract signed at the moment of his recruitment indicated that he had only five more years to work before going on retirement.

He looked at Antony’s position. Sigili-Mundu was his first post, and it was hardly a month since he began work. He was now “Surveillant General”. That he would be made “Directeur” and he Zaché compelled to go on retirement within a matter of a few days was certain. The signs were there already. His own personality as the boss of the school had been instantly driven into the background, all because of Antony. Antony had deliberately decided to expose his years of service and experience to the ridicule of those stupid people of Sigili-Mundu.

He would not ignore the implications of that appointment. If Antony had been made “Surveillant General,” it was not unconnected with the way he had spoken to the *Prefet* the first day he went of be introduced to him. It was not unconnected with the story of the books from Canada for the college. It was not unconnected with all those head-aching suggestions Antony kept making at every pace to prove that he was the most farsighted person alive.

If he was not to lose his hard-won office to that meddlesome “Anglophone” upstart, then Sigili-Mundu must be made to believe that Antony was less, far less, even worse than he had led them into believing. To this one indomitable cause he swore to direct all his energies.

Antony was in class teaching when the announcement was made. It was on his return, flanked by his pupils that he heard calling him "Ge-ne-rall! Ge-ne-rall!" and saying "Felicitations! Felicitations!" he could hardly understand what it was all about. It was the Post Master who talked to him about it. He told Antony that the President had decreed him Zaché's second-in-command in the running of the school; that Antony was automatically entitled to a big free house, and a car allowance.

Antony refused to believe him. When he got home he saw Argus tied to a pillar at the gate into Zaché's compound. It had been tied on the veranda behind the house between the kitchen and the bathroom. He played with the dog for a while and then entered the house. Zaché was lying lazily in his sofa. He laid so silently that Antony thought he too might not have heard the rumour at all.

"Somebody has just been telling me down the road there that I have been promoted sir," he began.

"Iz no promotion!" Zaché cut in bitterly. "Zhey sent a Surveillant General hieur bot he refused not to come hieur becoze zhiz iz zhe bush. So zhey sey you will help him, fer sometimez. Iz not zhe promotion.

Antony knew that it was true that he had been promoted, and that Zaché was just being jealous. Just to be sure, he went up to the *Prefet*. The man received him very warmly and opened a bottle of whisky with which to congratulate him. He summarized the whole event in the five words of Saminou:

"Good pay for good work."

This was when Antony gave him a piece of friendly advice. Sigili-Mundu needed to choose between Zaché and the college. The two were incompatible. Zaché seemed to have come there to destroy and not to create or help grow. Somebody else, even a Northerner was what was needed to save the institution.

Saminou's translation was catastrophic. He said the *Prefet* should use his powers to make Antony replace Zaché as the principal of the college. This secret plot would eventually filter into Zaché's ears.

That night, without having heard of the secret plan Antony was hatching with the *Prefet*, Zaché refused to give him food.

When he returned from school the following day at noon Zaché who had remained at home that whole morning told him that he would want to speak to him at four o'clock.

"Can't it be at about six? I will have a class with the students from three to five o'clock," Antony tried to explain.

"Ei heve said that I want to speak to you et fo o'clock," Zaché said in a very loud voice.

"At home here or in school?"

"Hieur." Zaché told him."

"There will be no school then this afternoon?" Antony inquired.

Zaché looked at him and said nothing. Antony took lunch, a loaf of bread he had bought on his way back from school, and then laid down for a rest. When he got up at half past two there were some three people in the parlour of Zaché's house. A woman was among them. The three introduced themselves to him as his "subalterns." They gave their names as Ibrahim Daoudou, Abu Duma and Abida Genabu. They said they were appointed "Surveillants" to the college the day before and that when they came for their "certificat de prise de service" that morning Zaché asked them to come again at 4 p.m.

They spoke almost entirely in Pidgin English. Sometime afterwards two of his students came in – the class prefect and his assistant. They were followed immediately by the college typist and night watchman. When eventually Zaché himself returned he was accompanied by all the labourers in the compound. The caretaker of the Inspector's house was with them. As soon as Zaché saw that all those he had invited had come he rose and spoke.

"Mr. Enteny Nkoaleck!" he began.

Antony was startled not just by the very stiff formality of the address but by the fact that he was the subject of the meeting.

"Yes sir," he answered.

"You eur notsing to me, you undzerstand?" he began from a very high pitch of indignation. Antony blinked his eyes, mystified.

"You eur notsing to enybodies in Sigili-Mundu. Let me tell you zhat."

"I don't get you, sir,"

"Stupid," Zaché insulted him."

Antony looked round into their faces in silence.

"You came hieur in Octobeur. End you heve bin living only in my houze. Ei heve ben giving you to eat and drink. Everyzingz. And you eur not satisfied. You now want to sleep my niece in my house, on my own bed."

Antony was struck dump with stupefaction, and the sheer brutality of the accusation.

"That I want to sleep with your niece?"

Zaché did not answer him.

"Bullshit. Where is she herself? I am not all that silly..."

Zaché did not answer him. He only went on to narrate a tale of Antony's wicked actions to the people. When he had finished talking to them he turned to Antony again and said:

"You have bin hieur for one mont. End you heve tld zhe whole ton zhat you heve fifteen degrees. Zhat ei heve only a diplome; zhat ei am not qualified to be directeur ef zhiz school; zhat you eur to be zhe directeur."

Antony was silent.

"Who eur you to say zhat we Frensh people eur viry stupide and cannot be ebel to rule zhiz country? You say zhe gouvernement wish sent me hieur hez no intelligence, not so?"

Antony said nothing.

"Espèce de cong comme toi," he told him in French, spitting in front of him. Then he went into another lengthy explanation in French to the people. Antony gnawed at his lips for a very long time and then asked:

"Mr. Zaché, who told you I said all that?"

Zaché smiled for a very long time and then asked:

"So when you weur talking all zhat yoeur betisse you tsink nobody wez zheur? He turned to the bricklayer by his side and asked them: Iz it lie?"

"Is not lie directeur," the two men said. Zaché then asked them to say what Antony told them the very first day he met them.

"Plefesseur been tok sey yi de chop na wit king for Engrand," the carpenter began. "Yi be tok sey na letric de cum yi biabia for head; sey ne lectrid de lob oya fo yi shikin. Yi been sey na lectrid de

do yi all things.” There was silence. Zaché turned to the caretaker of the Inspector’s house and asked him what happened.

“Plefesseur bin tok sey na yi hoss directeur. Yi bin tok sey yi no fit stop for kana hoss, onley tha wan.”

There was silence.

“End yesterday,” Zaché started again, “You heve started to sey zhat zhe gouvernement hez made you general becoze zheur is no norzherneur who can be ebel to do zhe work like you not so? You don’t know zhat any of zheze people sitting hieur now can be betteur Surveillant general zhan you? Can you speak French?”

Antony did not answer him.

“Ei do not want to heve eny trouble againx you, so jest inteur into zhe house end cerry yoeur tsingz out.”

Antony tried to speak.

“Go out ef my house!” Zaché ordered him.

Antony rose, went into the house and gathered his things and then walked out before the very eyes of the people he was supposed to controll!

“I’d be damned. Mr. Zaché,” Antony addressed him with his hands in his pocket. “You are the principal of College Principal de Sigili-Mundu which you have been announcing all over the place as your personal property, do you know that?”

Zaché did not answer.

“This is also your house. You were under no pressure to admit me here. If after the nomination you thought that the principal and a surveillant general cannot sleep under the same roof, you could just tell me to quit. You did not need to go through the trouble of framing this kind of charge. Does it occur to you how much self-respect you lose in mobilizing your own labourers and encouraged them to tell blatant lies against an innocent person? You know that I can’t do that kind of shit...”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Antony went straight to the *Prefet's* office where he reported how he had been very falsely accused and openly disgraced by Zaché in front of his subordinates, and how he had been driven out of the house. The *Prefet* received the news with very great alarm. He wondered loudly why Zaché would do that.

Antony had expected him to invite Zaché to invite Zaché so that they thrash the case there and then. He did not. Instead he asked for accommodation to be arranged in the Case de Passage for Antony, pending completion of work on the house that was to be occupied by him as the “Surveillant General.” Antony appreciated the change but could still not understand why the *Prefet* was so reluctant to take action against Zaché

When Zaché came there the following day to make his formal complaint he made a serious administrative blunder. He timidly warned that he would use his authority to cause Zaché to be removed from his office and be replaced by Antony if he Zaché did not want to work in peace with Antony. Zaché concluded that the *Prefet* must be siding with Antony. He informed the *Prefet* that he was not only a seasoned educationalist but the man who had singlehandedly fought for the creation of the college in Sigili-Mundu.

The running of the college demanded constant discussion between the *Prefet* and the authorities of the college. The *Prefet* was already having problems understanding the intricacies of college administration explained to him in French. How was he to cope with information handed to him by an *anglo* in translation? He warned that it was most unlikely for an *anglo* to be allowed to rule in a francophone environment. To ask Zaché to leave, he argued was tantamount to saying that the college should leave Sigili-Mundu. He pointed out to the *Prefet* that the problem between him and Antony was a struggle for supremacy between *anglo* minority and franco-phone majority.

Antony had already gone to school. He was still teaching English because he had not fully taken up his new responsibilities. Besides, nobody had been sent to take over his lessons as the only English teacher there. It was one of the criticisms of the system he noted in his diary that the Government promoted teachers and took them away from the professional duties without sending anybody to replace them in the classrooms. When he returned from school that afternoon the *Prefet* called the two men together and told them to bury any differences which existed between them and work peacefully for the betterment of the state. He cited the motto of the state: "MALICE TOWARDS NONE."

They did. On his part Zaché was infuriated by the fact that his complaint had merely earned Antony a more comfortable place to live in.

As "Surveillant General" Antony was entitled to an allowance of 12,000 francs. But this was only possible upon receipt by the Minister of Education of a document signed by the head of his institution that he had assumed his new responsibilities. Zaché refused to sign the document. Zaché was also an important signatory to a document which would make Antony the occupant of the house of the "Surveillant General" when it was completed. This too he refused to sign. Zaché refused to give him the keys to the office of "Surveillant General" on the pretext that there was no furniture in it. And even after Antony made it clear that he could furnish it himself, he would not change his mind. Zaché refused to release the stamp of "Surveillant General" to Antony on grounds that he had received no such thing from Tetseale, and had not been instructed to have one carved or ordered.

He did not stop there! He seized every opportunity to belittle and frustrate Antony by deliberately and systematically contradicting his orders. If a student committed a crime and Antony asked him to cut grass, this was the moment Zaché found most appropriate to give him a learned lecture on leniency in French. And this he did in front of the culprit, always ending up by asking him to leave grass cutting and pick up pieces of papers! If he found a boy picking up papers as punishment, Zaché always thought it the best occasion

to point out to Antony how the lightness of punishment defeats its main purpose which is to discourage the student from repeating the error. There was always an educational principle or some philosophy to be cited as being violated each time Antony gave a student any kind of punishment.

Schedules he arranged for his “Surveillants” to follow for the supervision of work on Thursdays and Saturday s were either cancelled or unilaterally changed by Zaché, without any explanations afterwards. Even the list of sweepers of the classrooms and office were cancelled when Zaché discovered that they were set up by Antony. Flower beds and areas mapped on the compound for the raising of grass lawns were razed to the ground by students acting under the orders of Zaché. When Antony reported all these things to the *Prefet* he advised him to take courage. He described the acts as temptations on the part of Zaché to see how he would react to insults.

Antony, in fact, took courage, for he could hear above the pumping of his heart, the call to duty. But Antony’s life was not to be all disappointments. The very day that he spoke to the *Prefet*, he received a consoling letter from the EDMONTON ROTORY CLUB in Alberta, Canada. The letter mentioned Arnold Wiebe’s name and two others who had written to them to express the same request – books. It assured Antony and his institution that a consignment of educational materials, mainly books, but also including some typewriters, would be sent. A Canadian Air Force Hercules plane, it said, would be going to Uganda in about a month or so. The precise date was to be mailed to him. That plane would drop off the first of several consignments of books at the nearest airport to Sigili-Mundu. That meant Atule air strip. “*There is an element of propaganda involved,*” the letter said. “*There must be proof that your institution received the goods and that they liked them and would use them. On way of doing this would be to mobilize the local population to be on hand to receive them. It would be a good idea if you would take pictures of the head of the school ant the Chief of the village welcoming the pilots and receiving the gifts. Receiving future consignments,*” the letter concluded, “*would depend on how you would handle this first package.*”

That evening he prepared a special dish of cow liver for Argus to celebrate the good news. Argus had, within a very few weeks grown into a huge fierce dog. When he was not working on his manuscripts Antony spent a long time with the dog, teaching it how to obey simple commands, how to chase off intruders into his compound and how to turn the door knob and enter the parlour.

Armed with this good news, and now in his capacity as an authority of the administration of the college he went to the Post Master and asked him to accompany him to see the *Prefet* on the issue of the latrine, well and urinal.

When Saminou translated it the *Prefet* gave his own reply. He told Antony that he was sincerely happy to see a stranger speak with such concern for the children of other people. He told him that he would never allow things to go so bad, now that he had been told the consequences likely to follow. He told Antony that they too had been thinking about the situation and that they had even written to Tetseale about it. He said it was the highly centralized policy of administration in Tetseale that was frustrating everybody and everything. He said the provinces had no powers whatsoever, especially an “arrondissement” (Saminou had no English equivalent) like Sigili-Mundu. He said everything that the college needed had to come from Tetseale.

Antony saw it differently: Tetseale did not have any wells and latrines dug and kept there to be exported to every angle in the country. They did not have any expert well or latrine diggers whom they send all over the place to perform such duties. All they sent was money to finance the job. The *Prefet* could use his position to make natives do the digging. When the money came from Tetseale he could use it to compensate for the expenses incurred. The *Lamido* could be informed about it. He advised them not to consult Zaché because he seemed to be living in his own world entirely.

“Just impose the decision on him. Don’t let him know that it was my suggestion. Just impose it on him,” he concluded.

He gave Saminou a very long time to do the translation, even going back to repeat certain points, just to make sure that the right message got across to the *Prefet*. Then he went on:

“We shall then get a bucket for the classroom. If there is any difficulty in getting one I shall provide it from my own house. The

children will then be asked to bring cups regularly to school until they are given dormitories. You will then see how close to the sea Sigili-Mundu will be.”

Saminou clapped for a very long time before translating to the *Prefet* who too had started clapping long before he was told the reason for the excitement. When he heard it he clapped again and then told Saminou that he agreed with every word that Antony had said. But he said that since it was no problem for him to get the required number of men for the work, it was not necessary for Antony to mention it to the *Lamido* as he seemed to have suggested.

It was at this point that Antony showed Saminou the letter from the Canadian Rotary Club and the gifts they had promised to send. Once again Saminou talked only of a giant bookshop and not a library. Antony told them to get the *Lamido* and Zaché involved so that a delegation including some students could be sent to Atule on the appointed day.

A letter confirming the date and hour of arrival of the books was later received. It was Saminou himself who went to the *Lamido* with the letter. The Chieftain was happy to hear of it and agreed to co-operate with Antony. He promised he would personally be at Atule airport with an entourage of his nobles and a few Sub-Chiefs. Zaché found an excuse for being absent, and found an excuse for preventing any students to be present.

With his career showing such promise Antony decided to write to Eru. It was very long letter and in it he described both the people and the place as honestly but as morbidly as he could. He spared no detail whether it concerned the *Prefet* or the women. He told Eru about the gifts and about his appointment as “Surveillant General,” about Argus his only friend and guardian and how he would have escaped from the place, but for the dog.

He did, however, not post the letter. First of all he misplaced it among his manuscripts. Secondly he also received a letter from Eru confirming the rumour of a certain radio message he had received some time ago, informing him of a fatal illness that had infected him.

There was a certain veterinary assistant, Musa, who usually treated Argus. Leaving the dog in the man's care he left with the *Lamido* and Saminou to receive the gifts.

The plane, a *Hercules* propeller military aircraft, arrived at precisely 4 o'clock in the afternoon on March 18. The authorities at the Atule airport had long been informed of the impending cargo and so Antony had virtually no problem clearing the books. Six crew members accompanied the goods, all military officers. The *Lamido*, Saminou (who posed as the Principal of the college) and Antony took pictures with the pilots and crew.

Antony made a very brief speech in which he expressed much thanks to the ROTARY CLUB and the Canadian Government, and also reiterated the purpose the gifts would serve – the creation of a community library to serve Sigili-Mundu and its environs. The Flight Commander and then Captain Conrad Macgee spoke in praise of Antony's very rare and selfless devotion to the duty of bringing up his people.

The *Lamido* said a few words and blessed the crew, a few words which Saminou translated in a speech that lasted about fifteen minutes. The pilots were very impressed with the reception of the things and reassured Antony and his entourage that a second consignment would be sent in nine weeks. He decided that Saminou, the *Lamido* and the rest of the people would return to Sigili-Mundu with the things while he himself continued to Likume to see what was wrong with Eru.

He had not applied to Zaché for leave of absence. The goods arrived on Friday and so he estimated that since Atule was on the way South to Likume, he would dash down, spend a few hours with Eru and then return in time for work on Monday. Throughout the journey to Atule and onward to Likume Antony was disturbed by the fact that he had not seen the letter he had written. If he had misplaced it, and if it had fallen into Zaché's hands, then he could be in for trouble because he knew what he had written about Zaché.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Antony *had* suddenly become very forgetful. It was only when he was on his way to Likume that he recalled he had left the letter Eru had sent to him behind in Sigili-Mundu. He had not taken particular note of where Eru was said to have been hospitalized.

When he arrived in Likume he went first to Eru's house. It looked deserted. The veranda was littered with the droppings of fowls and goats. As he walked round a neighbour came up to him and informed him that Eru had been taken to the home of a medicine man, a certain Malam Abubakar in Omenikang. Antony also learned that he was so sick that they were not sure he would survive. Asked what was wrong with him the neighbour said he had been bewitched.

Antony took a taxi to the bus station to Omenikang. The place was just about thirty five kilometres from Likume town and when he saw the bus it required four more passengers to fill it up. Antony was so anxious to see Eru that he paid the fare of four passengers and then they left. As they drove along he wondered what could really be wrong with Eru. He knew that Eru was not married, so the story of poisoning by his wife did not make much sense, even though the illness was beginning to sound serious in his ears.

Malam Abubakar's healing home was in the outskirts of Omenikang. You walked some fifty metres from the road and you were received by a servant who showed you where to sit – on stools made from tree trunks. When they entered the shrine a servant went behind the house and a few minutes later a man emerged. He was just slightly shorter than Antony, and was probably in his late fifties or early sixties. He wore a raffia cap dyed black – a sign of traditional nobility – with a yellow, blue, green, white and red feather stuck to the left side very near his ear.

He had an effeminate face save for a long beard that looked as though it was cut off the chin of a he-goat and glued to his chin. His neck was thin with a pronounced Adam's Apple which moved

forth and back as he spoke. His voice was hoarse as though he had drunk fried palm oil or was suffering from a dry cough. He wore three sets of beads round his neck – one of cowries, one of ivory and one of an indeterminate type of dry grass and tiny snails shells. There were two tattoos on his arms – that of a spider on the right arm and a spear on the left.

His dress was a hand woven smock jumpa and a pair of trousers to match. In his oversized rubber sandals he walked with such uncertain steps that it was obvious he had splayed feet.

“I am Anthony Nkoaleck,” Antony began. “I have been directed to see my friend Eru who is sick here.”

He motioned to Antony to follow him. Antony noticed that his right had had only three fingers, the thumb, the forefinger and the small finger. It looked as if he had been born that way because as Antony noticed later, the same configuration existed on his left hand.

They were led into an outer chamber which was virtually a shrine. To the left as you entered was a bamboo table overlaid with large goatskins on which an old piece of plywood had been placed. Above the table stood a bamboo shelf of oddities: two skulls, presumably human skulls, the shell of a giant red crab, a small board on which was pinned eleven feathers – yellow, red, blue, brown, green, black, white, orange, violet and the like. Over the table was a python skin that spanned the whole four metres length of the wall. Above the python skin, just about the middle hung the head of a buffalo, horns and all. To the right of the table stood an assortment of medicines in small bottles, some corked, others open.

They passed through the grimy dirty shrine area into the back yard. It looked like a flower garden: there were herbs of different types to the left, to the centre and to the right. Malam led him into the last room of a row of five rooms. As Antony stepped in Commy rose and came and fell on his chest, weeping.

“Look at your friend,” she said.

Antony stood at the door for a while to get to the darkness inside, then as his eyes cleared he saw a small table on which stood three calabash bowls. One contained a greenish substance almost like fresh cow dung, the second contained a greyish liquid from which white fumes rose, and the third contained grains of kernels and ground nuts. Behind the table stood a long bamboo bed on which Eru lay, backing the door.

Chapter Thirty-Four

E*ru must* have heard Antony's voice, for, in spite of the agony in which he was he called without turning to look at the visitor:

"Bo, Antony, you were waiting for me to die before you come down?"

"I only got your letter four days ago," Antony said. "I did not personally hear the radio announcement, and my Director did not permit me to leave until last evening. Somebody told me some time ago that he heard I was being asked to come to Likume. The Director could not allow me to come down because, as he said, I myself did not even know the name of the patient. I had never associated you with sickness, so I could not guess it was you. When they said it was a man who was sick I knew it was not my aunt."

Eru did not say anything. He grunted, made a slow but rather excruciating effort to turn, but screamed and laid back, facing the wall. His whole body was covered with a red blanket dotted all over with what Antony concluded were patches of blood. When Antony compared the filth in which Eru lay with the splendour of his home in Likume, he shook his head lamentably.

He moved to the bed side and pulled the blanket below the level of his shoulder. Eru's body as far as he could see looked like a beehive of marks made by the blade of the *medicineman*. He pulled the blanket lower and lower until he reached Eru's buttocks. The same blade marks filled the body, some still bleeding, others already turning to sores.

"What is wrong with you, bo Eru?" he marvelled.

Again Eru tried in vain to turn.

"And you cannot even turn your body?"

"I cannot," Eru said in his throat.

Antony tried to turn him over on his side. Eru cried, but submitted until he turned and laid on his right side, facing Antony.

His entire left side was already developing bed sores and even gave off an unpleasant odour.

“What do you say is wrong, bo Eru?”

Eru beckoned to the *medicineman*.

“Malam,” he began, “this is my brother I have been talking to you about. He has just come. Please tell him yourself, what is killing me. If I tell him he will not believe. He has always lived in a world of his own—”

Antony turned to Malam.

“They have tied him up in the sky,” Malam said. “Each time I get closer to bring him back, they put obstacles in my way. They throw dust in my eyes.”

“Bullshit. Who are the they Malam is talking about?”

“His enemies. Who else could they be?”

“For how long have you been here?”

“Six weeks,” Eru himself answered.

Antony turned to Malam and beckoned him out. There he asked: “What are his chances of surviving? I don’t understand this story of tying him up in the sky.”

Malam shrugged and told him:

“We only have to see. When this medicine that I am using now does not work,” he said pointing to a small bundle of ashes in a transparent paper on a small cane table near the bed.

“What is really wrong with him?”

Malam lowered his voice to almost a whisper.

“You know that your friend loved women so much,” he began. “A woman went to a friend Malam to look for medicine to make your friend love her more than any other woman. The *medicineman* gave her something else, and the thing took him to the sky and left him there.”

Antony smiled briefly. What nonsense, he said to himself. He left Malam and walked back in and pulled a stool which he placed by the bed.

“Let me talk to my brother alone,” he said to Malam and the women who stood against the wall watching them. They went out reluctantly and sat on a bench outside, but within listening distance.

“Bo, Eru, what exactly is wrong with you?” he inquired with a frantic expression on his face.

"Let me say it before you deny," Eru began. "Commy is killing me. She sold me to the devil."

Again Antony smiled.

"No, let us be serious," he said. "What makes you think so?"

"Commy took my pant and singlet and my hair to a *medicineman*."

"For what reason?" Antony asked, convinced that Eru was merely imagining things.

"She thinks that I do not love her. She wanted charm, they gave her poison."

"How do you come by that conclusion?"

"Ask her," Eru said. "If she says she did not do so, then we can talk some more."

Antony went out, called Commy aside, and asked her. He was sure she would refute the charge.

"Yes, I took his clothing to a *medicineman*," Commy admitted.

Anthony was struck dumb.

"You did?"

She admitted again and then went on to explain precisely why. She confessed that the accusations against her from Eru's sisters and even Eru himself that she had bewitched him had become unbearable. Moreover, Eru's state continued to deteriorate. If he died they would all say she killed him. Somebody told her of a *medicineman* who could turn things around. She went to the *medicineman* who asked her to bring a piece of his clothing and a small quantity of his hair. She was so anxious to see Eru well that did not know the risk involved in taking the things to the *medicineman*.

"And you gave all of them?"

She admitted.

"How did you come by the hair?"

"I shaved his hair," she confessed.

"Who went with you?"

"Nobody," she said.

Goddamn! Thought Antony, bewilderment tearing at his heart and he spoke with such anger that everybody around could hear him.

"Your husband is sick, and you stand accused. With fingers still pointing at you, you carry out an independent investigation to establish your innocence. I do not believe in witchcraft," he said. "But should Eru die, know that you will never wash your hands

clean. Even if he gets well you will not get any credit for your pains because all his people know is that you have sold their brother to the devil, something you yourself have confirmed.”

He went back in leaving Commy standing in the sun, the entire Eru family watching from the veranda, exchanging glances.

“What does she say?” Eru asked.

“There is something I do not understand,” Antony said. “She admits, but it still does not make sense to me. I find her incapable of such evil, bo, considering just what you said you did for her.”

“It should, bo Antony. When in your letter to me you said you had found a devil in your boss, I believed you because I know devils are all over the place. Now that it concerns me you doubt,” Eru said with sudden inspiration.

“You do not believe in evil? You have read from the Bible that Satan confronted God, not in hell, not in Limbo, or in the street, but in Heaven itself, God’s kingdom,” Eru told him. “Remember how he challenged God, fought with him for seven days and when God finally won he took along with him to hell one third of the angels in Heaven. On earth since then he is the personal body guard of all heads of states, and also rules over the lives of four fifths of the human race. Bo, Antony, you have to believe that evil exists and that it comes only through human beings.”

Antony blinked copiously, nodded, reflected, and took in a deep breath. He had himself been witness to the misdeeds of an evil character in Sigili-Mundu. “I feel bad for you, bo Eru,” he said, “not because of what you are saying but because of what I am seeing.

Eru smiled faintly and said:

“What can one do?”

As Eru said this he turned finally. His once round cheeks were a sunken mass of wrinkles. There was a ghastly whiteness in his staring eyes both of which seemed encircled by rings of pain. His lips were gathered in sorrowful lines. The only thing left was his sense of humour. He forced a smile and inquired:

“Bo Antony, have you ever thought of death? Have you ever thought of that moment when you will be dead, while the rest of the world is going on? I wish everybody can die at once. I think that is why people fear death, the fact that you will be absent while all those beautiful girls will be present, screwing while you are there fighting with worms.”

“Those are not healthy thoughts to harbour under the circumstances,” Antony said.

“When you are near death,” Eru said softly but reassuringly, “you have to think only of it. From the way I am feeling, I don’t think I can get out again.”

“Have you been to the hospital?” Antony inquired.

“He came from the hospital to here,” Malam answered for Eru.

“Which doctor did you see?” he asked.

“There is no doctor that he has not seen,” Malam answered again.

“Let him answer himself,” Antony said angrily. “He is not deaf.” He turned to Eru.

“I saw all the doctors,” Eru said.

“You saw Dr Mandieg?”

“He was the first one I saw.”

“And what did he say was wrong?”

“He said my sickness was psychological, that I had gastric, that I was depressed, that I had malaria, that I had typhoid. There is no illness they have not accused me of having. And they could not cure me of any of them.”

Antony was silent for a very long time, and then he asked:

“Whose idea was it that you should be brought here?”

“My family. If you are sick and a hospital cannot cure you, you must change hospitals.”

Antony asked for Eru’s hospital notebook containing his medical record and returned to town. Dr. Mandieg had long closed but he managed to find his house and talk to him.

“Do you believe in traditional medicine, doctor?” he asked when they went into Dr. Mandieg’s study.

“I am a doctor and I believe in treatment, irrespective of where it comes from. You want to do native medicine?”

When he showed Dr. Mandieg Eru’s hospital record, the man said he was hearing of the case narrated by Antony for the first time. He could not immediately recall the particular case, but was ready to go there and see Eru because Antony looked extremely disturbed. They drove to Omenikang in Mandieg’s car. The medical

records showed that he had once been hospitalised for malaria, and then typhoid, but there was no stamp to indicate that he had been discharged officially. Apparently Eru had been secreted away.

Antony introduced Dr. Mandieg to Malam Abubakar simply as a friend who had come to visit Eru. But Malam was the only person to be fooled in the place because most of those attending to Eru and other patients knew him very well. Besides, Malam followed them into the room and as soon as Eru saw him even from his sleeping position he recognised him. He was still lying in the same sideways position in which Antony had left him.

"Welcome doctor," he greeted. Malam instantly took offence, he knew there was always the danger of losing his patient each time a doctor came from the hospital. He forbade Dr. Mandieg to touch Eru and it was after Eru himself persuaded him that Malam permitted him to go near the bed.

Dr. Mandieg pulled open Eru's eyes, examined his tongue, felt his pulse and then his belly along the sides and in front, Eru screaming in the process. He put his stethoscope to his chest, side and back, asked Eru a few questions, whether he went to stool, how often, whether he ate well, whether he vomited after a meal and at what moments he felt excruciating pain. Then nodding he told Antony:

"It's no witchcraft. He needs to be taken to the hospital, and he must be taken out here fast," he ended up. "I suspect something scientifically verifiable." Eru must be taken to the General Hospital in town.

Malam would not let Eru go. But Antony swore he wasn't leaving without Eru. Malam told him that he had more medicines to give him, which should take some three more weeks. They would have to wait until he had completed his treatment.

"And what if you cannot cure him by that time? What if he dies during those your weeks?" he asked.

"Two months he did not die," began Malam, "how can he die in three weeks?"

"You may still bring the witchcraft medicine to the hospital and give him," Dr. Mandieg said. "But for the treatment you cannot handle what he has."

Eru spent Sunday night in the Likume General Hospital. That very night he ordered an X-Ray to be conducted on Eru. He studied the results and then told Anthony:

“As you can see, our X-Ray machines are not equipped to detect witchcraft. I can only tell you what I suspect in this matter: It is not witchcraft as such.”

Laboratory tests proved Dr. Mandieg right. It was actually a case of intestinal blockage. The following morning Eru would undergo a major surgery.

That evening, however, Antony decided against all his natural impulses to see Vicky. After anaesthesia, Eru was able to converse with him, talk about the “Surveillant General” affair and other matters. That was the very first time he was visiting Likume since he took up his new appointment in the North about a year ago.

Before he left Likume he had told Vicky that he would be writing to her to give directives on how to come and join him, as soon as he settled down. But he had not kept his word. He had deliberately decided not to write to her. In a brief note to Eru telling him of the numerous problems he was having with his boss he had told Eru that he would never write to her because he did not think they could ever be husband and wife any more.

Upon the receipt of this note Eru had managed to secure a job for her as Domestic Science Mistress in a private school in town. He did not tell her about the letter he had received from Antony. He kept hoping that loneliness would make Antony change his mind about her and invite her to join him. At the school Vicky earned I3,000 francs a month. She had still not given up the hope entirely of winning back Antony’s love.

During those nine months of absence she wrote him four letters. The last two contained two money orders of I0.000 francs each. This, she said, was to enable him to overcome his initial difficulties there. To save I0.000 francs from a salary of I3.000 francs meant a tremendous amount of sacrifice.

But Antony did not reply to any of the letters. He took the money and used it, with the intention of paying her back as soon as he got his arrears. So far he was earning only 40.000 francs per month, which was half of his full salary. And out of this amount he was saving 20.000 francs. As soon as his employment into civil service

was regularised, he would be paid all that the state owed him. Besides, Vicky's faithfulness and devotion embarrassed and annoyed Antony. He could not understand how she could afford to be so insensitive to insults. Had he known her well before their marriage, and had they been in love a long time, her determination would have been understandable.

On her part Vicky would do anything to remain Antony's wife. It was true that Antony was generally talked about as the most intelligent man in the world. But that was all that he had going for him. He was not rated among the handsome or richest men of the tribe. He was not gifted in any particular way, say in sports, to make a woman as beautiful as Vicky want to die for him. Vicky's resolve to stick with him had to do with her self-esteem which the stigma of VD had hurt. Had Antony not wanted the relationship to continue for any other reason she would not have cared so much. But to reject her because she was a carrier of VD, it was such a shame that she thought the better bargain would be to hang in there and bear Antony's taunts.

The trip had come abruptly, and she was not actually expecting him at that moment, even though Vicky knew that Antony would have to come down to see his friend. She had returned to her father's house as soon as Antony left, and it was there that Antony met her. By this time she had already resolved that she would never write to Antony again because it was clear that he did not love her any more. On his part, Antony had not come there that evening to reconcile with her. He had come unannounced to surprise her with a man. This way he would use it as an excuse to divorce her. He wanted too to see whether his long absence would make any difference in his attitude towards her.

Vicky was sitting at home, peacefully knitting, when he came in. The reception was very cold indeed on both sides. He was still thinking of the gravity of Eru's sickness, a thought which made him even more aggressive towards her than might have been the case had nothing else disturbed his mind. For about ten minutes they sat saying nothing to each other. She expected he would say

something about the money she had sent to him, or ask her where she got the money from, and how she was getting money to survive. But he said nothing. To his perennial worries about Vicky were now added the problem of his future, the question of transfer, the fear of Zaché, up some conversation. She asked him:

"Tony, what has brought you here at this time like this? Or is it Eru's sickness which I heard them announcing over the radio?"

"It is not serious enough to warrant my coming down, Vicky?" he asked. Vicky shook her head sadly. Antony, she thought painfully, had not changed.

"I did not say it is not," she said, "After all I have been to see him myself, several times."

Antony looked at her and then looked away. Again Vicky decided to open up conversation.

"Tony, did you see the four letters I sent to you?"

"I did."

"And the money?"

"I saw it. It will be paid back to you in due course."

"It was not a loan, Tony. I just felt that you must—"

"It will be paid back as soon as I get my arrears," he insisted.

About an hour later he decided to return to the hospital to see Eru. Vicky offered to accompany him.

"I cannot stop you," he said. "Do what you like," he added. "I can't stop you from doing anything."

Somehow Vicky still did not believe that Antony had made up his mind irrevocably against her. She forced herself to believe that he was just tempting her. It was the trip to the hospital that clarified that element of doubt in her and convinced her that they were never to be together again.

He killed all eagerness on her part to know anything from him by giving very short monosyllabic answers. And immediately after each answer his mind seemed to subside into a dreadful reverie in which she had no place. At Eru's bedside she learned for the first time that Antony had spent a miserable year in the North, and that he was actually looking for a means to leave the place.

She heard for the first time that he had once been made a ‘Surveillant General’. All this news she received like a wounding arrow through the heart. She assumed quite naturally that if *her* husband encountered any difficulties, she ought, by virtue of their bond, to know it first. She ought not to hear it at second hand, or only when he was telling an outsider. She ought to share in his secrets and problems that affected his personal happiness, if he was still her husband. She therefore regarded his exclusion of her from the problems of his life as the most poignant mode by which a husband could ever inflict disgrace on a wife.

Returning home that evening, Vicky prepared some rice and stewed a chicken for him. He would not eat. He lay on the chair for some time and left to visit his aunt whom he had not seen for a long time. He refused her from coming with him. He promised to return later in the night, but never did.

Early the next morning Eru underwent a successful major surgical operation. When he recovered from the anaesthesia the *labour* pains he had felt for several months virtually disappeared. Anthony decided he would have to leave Sigili-Mundu. He would go to Tetseale to seek his transfer out of the place. But there was some disheartening news, just as he was about to leave. “During the operation,” Mandieg told Antony, “we detected a slight trace of Abé-Lepahan-lymphus.” He described the infection in very general terms as one of several forms of cancer of the lymph. He would have to send the specimen abroad for confirmation. That would take at least six weeks. Anthony did not ask any questions to know the disease further. But Mandieg assured him that it was potentially very dangerous (as all forms of cancer are) but that it could be controlled, even if it could not be cured.

Thus, before Antony left Likume two days later, Eru could take in liquid foods without vomiting, something he had not done for months. His eyes began to regain their lustre. But the result of the specimens sent was still being awaited. Antony went away without talking to Vicky. Once again, besides his previous grievance against her, the state of Eru’s health irked him immensely.

Chapter Thirty-Five

A*nap* on his way to Tetseale turned his fears into a reality. Zaché had led Antony with the students and staff to the prefecture on the pretext that the *Prefet* wanted to address them all. There as soon as everybody had assembled he called Antony to the front of the crowd and inquired:

“Mr. Surveillant General, ei know zhat you alone eur zhe only educated man in zhe world. Bot tell ez. Do yo know zhiz letter?” He held it in front of Antony, stretched it carefully and turned over the pages until he came to the end where Antony saw his own name.

Antony felt a sharp pain at the pit of his stomach and his body suddenly underwent a crisis of feeling akin to that which one undergoes during a nightmare. That was the letter he had written nearly two months ago to Eru. He knew what he had written in the letter about the people and the place. He knew that he had not lied on any point at all. But in the hands of a man as malignant as Zaché it could be used to destroy him completely. The indignation which had burst in him evaporated in the instance, to be replaced by a nervousness and a fear, like the prospect of annihilation. He now saw why Zaché could afford to go to that extent in framing lies against him. The thought of how he could have tracked the letter down did not even occur to him.

While he stood silent Zaché went round distributing photocopies of the letter he had asked to be made. Then he sent round the hall copies of his own translation. When that was done he did not return to Antony who still stood the way he was when he questioned him. He obtained permission from the *Prefet* to read the letter to the hearing of everybody. This was granted. And for thirty minutes Zaché read through the French, written in a language which unmistakably reflected his attitude towards Anthony and which he wanted to impress on everybody else’s mind.

When Zaché had finished reading it the *Prefet* took up the original and holding it in front of Antony asked him who wrote it.

"I did, sir," he admitted.

This sounded in everybody's poisoned mind like the confession of guilt for all the other accusations. The people's reaction was spontaneous. A sudden wild revulsion of sentiment swept over the hall as indignation against Antony rose to the point of violence.

But Zaché intervened. He explained to them that if anything happened to Antony there in Sigili-Mundu it was he, Zaché, who would be held responsible and that he had brought him there to learn from his past mistakes, not to harm him. He promised them that after that day, unless it was a curse from God that he should behave so badly, Antony was sure to lead a better life. Then just to have the insults still fresh in their minds he went over the very long French version again. It included all the insults in this world.

Antony could say nothing about it. He could refute nothing because he could not understand what Zaché was reading in French. If he needed to defend himself it could only be through an interpreter. Since he had himself confessed to having written the letter it was stupid and even risky for anybody to attempt interpreting any kind of defence for him in so hostile an atmosphere.

When Zaché had finished talking the *Prefet* called the cashier and the Post Master out to stand in front of him. There he asked Antony in all seriousness to look at the faces of those two people and tell him what was so particular about them that he should stigmatize them as dull.

Antony remained silent, vainly trying to rise above the affliction. The *Prefet* looked at his countrymen then asked if apart from the tribal marks there was anything on the faces of those people which was not found on Antony's face. He pointed for instance to the very long beard which each of them had, even making everybody see that Antony's was the longest of the three.

Antony was still silent.

He turned to Zaché just to make sure and asked him to speak the truth in the name of "Allah" whether he looked like a dull man. Zaché said, in his considered opinion, he did not think that *Prefet* looked dull at all.

Antony had said about the woven that ".... *they are very lascivious. They walk only in the night with torches. It is just enough for you to switch your torch on and off twice and the woman would understand that you want to have sex with her. And they would not hesitate....*

On this issue of their women the *Prefet* asked Antony how many he had caught with his torches since he said they were so cheap. This question too Antony did not answer. The *Prefet* then told him that he had done Sigili-Mundu very great harm. He admitted that the place was not as developed as the cities in the south. That, he said, was not their fault. He said there were several other places in the world like that. He asked Anthony how such a letter would have helped them to improve.

He said the only way to help the people would have been for him to do his small best like his boss Zaché was doing, without malice towards anybody. He said it would not be long before the government called on him to explain word for word what he had written about the country and the north in particular, what right he had to divide the people of such a quiet country into dull and clever, hardworking and lazy. He compelled Antony to apologise to him in writing as Zaché suggested, for the personal insult. He further compelled him to write another apology literally dictated to him by Zaché, and in which he confessed that everything he wrote in the letter was a lie.

This too Antony did.

Finally he was asked to go to the *Lamido* and apologise for the insults he had poured on the whole population. This he agreed to do. Then the *Prefet* gave him one hour to pack out of the *Case de Passage*.

About one hundred kilometres from Likume the train stopped so suddenly that he woke up from sleep to discover that it had all been a dream. The discovery, however, brought him little relief because that particular letter had not been seen by him and he believed that the incident could very well still take place with the same implications.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Antony went to his brother Njikem's office. There he explained his problem. Njikem had several connections, but none with the Ministry of Education. Besides he had not been impressed by the fact that Antony found nobody of value amongst the very beautiful Biongong girls he had introduced to him when he just came. He did not like the fact that Antony would not accept any person's ideas on anything.

Antony ended up going there alone. He was new to the environment, but the Minister was sufficiently informed on the problems involving him in the college, as presented by Zaché and the *Prefet*. His private secretary was from Zaché's tribe. He was also a former pupil of his, a relationship which Zaché exploited to his fullest advantage.

The Minister was always an extremely busy man. It was therefore his private secretary who opened all his official letters and arranged the order in which they were to be read and signed. It was he who determined the Minister's attitude towards decisions to be taken in certain troublesome cases. Zaché had written a personal letter to him as soon as he sensed that Anthony was trying to unseat him. The man had promised to do his best to ensure that Zaché retained his job and that his enemies were dealt with accordingly.

This was the man that Antony had to speak to first, if he needed to see the Minister of Education. When Antony came the man gave him time to explain the reasons for wanting to see the Minister. This was mere formality for it was part of his plan with Zaché, if not the whole plan, that Antony must never be allowed access to the Minister. After Antony had spoken, he told him that such a complaint would be better written down. Antony told him he had already done so. In fact he had spent the whole that week drafting the form the complaint would take, and had come out with a ten-page petition which he immediately handed over to the man.

The man took the document, carelessly glanced through the first five pages and then told Antony that the Minister was too occupied at that moment to see him, and that he would be busy for the next month. He told Antony that, besides, the Minister did not usually discuss such matters with the individuals concerned directly. He told Antony to go away, that he would take up the matter with him and then inform Anthony on the decision taken “as soon as practicable”, in writing. Antony was insistent, but the man would not permit him. In the end he lost his temper and spoke to the man rudely before going away. He was hardly ten yards from the office when the man in a fit of anger tore the petition into bits and threw it into the waste paper basket.

As could have been expected, Antony’s depression deepened more and more. To come to Tetseale and return to Sigili-Mundu without seeing the Minister meant that he was condemned to work with Zaché and his murderous clique forever.

He had always loved duty, not because of any particular rewards that it gave him, but merely because he felt very happy each time he did something well. Now he was being forced to think of the reward of his duty in Sigili-Mundu with great irritation.

He had not put in all efforts in his job to court favours from people. But, and this was crucial to his whole future existence, he had not done so to be cursed, shamed and discredited. He appraised the rules, the principles in which he had always clad his actions, those rules which placed conscience and moral sense above everything that man did on this planet. For the first time he doubted them. He thought of God and his protective guiding influence, which he knew should be man’s consolation through all tribulations. This too he doubted. He doubted whether it was really God’s will that he should suffer to that extent. And that trip which was supposed to help restore him to his once buoyant spirits had only added to his anger and frustration!

That night, he decided to drink himself drunk and forget the weariness and the fret of the world. At about 9 p.m. Ephraim led him to EXPERIMENTAL BAR, one of the most exciting spots frequently by English speaking people in Tetseale.

They entered when the music was on and so it was not easy to tell which seats were empty. They had to walk round the sweating teeming bodies of youths enjoying themselves in the dancing area. They finally found three empty seats to the right of the bar. Anthony, to Ephraim's consternation asked for two bottles of 33 EXPORT beer.

The drinks were served. Anthony had not come out looking for women. He had merely wanted to drink and forget the mounting problems he was encountering in Tetseale. The very first glass he took seemed to trigger off an odd sensation in him. He suddenly began to take an interest in everything around – the customers sitting at the counter, the sexes and groups of dancers, their dresses and even their various styles.

A group of three caught his particular attention. They were all girls, dancing together and later sitting and drinking together.

"Surprising that women and men will be dancing apart," he remarked.

Ephraim smiled and shrugged.

"What does one do? If the men are afraid to take the men the women ashamed to invite the men, what can you expect?" Ephraim asked.

As they were conversing and gesticulating in their direction one of the girls rose and went to the counter and purchased a Castel beer for herself. As the music went off the lights were brighter and so Antony was able to see her properly. She must not have been more than twenty three years old, was wearing a long wig and a pair of jeans. She was slightly fair in complexion, just as tall as Vicky and almost of the same bulk. Even in beauty she was not more beautiful than Vicky, but Antony hated any such comparison. Her shoulders were narrow had her hips broad. There was something fastidious about her neatness; her wig was well-groomed and dark, her eyes clear, her teeth very white. Her nails were well-trimmed.

Although she seemed to be concentrating on the purchase of her drink she may have noticed from the corner of her right eye that the people to the right where Antony sat were looking at her. She deliberately lingered at the counter long after her drink had been served. When she turned to the right Antony looked away.

Ephraim too noticed to his greatest surprise that Antony who had never looked at any woman twice was taking an immense interest in her.

“Fine baby,” Ephraim said,

Antony smiled to himself. As the girl swung round to return to her seat. Anthony called; “excuse me, please.”

She looked briefly in his direction and walked away. At her table she seemed to share a secret with her friends who burst out laughing.

Antony felt slightly ashamed. Was it that nobody on earth wanted him, he wondered. Another record was played, a popular Ayuk James number – Na man de loss. The three girls rose and danced in a bunch. When the music stopped the same girl who had attracted his attention came to the counter and bought two drinks for her friends. They all took beer.

Antony drained his glass and asked for another beer. The lady returned to her seat. Ephraim whispered something into his ear to the effect that the girl wanted a man. Antony was not listening. He sipped his drink and stared across at the girls.

There must have been telepathy involved because as soon as another record began playing the girls nudged at each other, rose and strolled across to Antony and Ephraim and invited them for a dance. Embarrassed but excited Antony drained his glass before joining them on the floor. The three ladies danced with the two of them and when the next record came up only two of them danced. Antony continued to dance with the same lady who had teased them so much.

What he did with the lady was not exactly dancing the Lingala number, but that chance encounter turned his life around. It did not take two dances for Antony to decide to like her. She introduced herself as Mercy Ngoza, a Second Year Law Student at the University in Tetseale. She said she was from Numchi, a tribe in the neighbourhood of Atule.

Antony found Mercy more witty and definitely more intelligent. In the course of the dance she spoke to Antony in such sweet words that he felt his depression evaporating on the spot. It was she who suggested that she would like to accompany Antony home.

One of the first questions Mercy had asked on the dancing floor was whether he was a married man.

“No way,” he said. “I am not married. I am a free electron.” He owned Vicky no apologies for disowning her because he hated her.

Njikem was surprised when Antony told him of his catch. It was he who told Antony he could go to a hotel, and that he would find an excuse to tell his wife why their guest had not returned with him.

Antony was in no mood to resist the temptation. They went home together. The following day when he got out of bed at noon, he seemed to have travelled through space and time which reduced all his past worries to a mere figment of the imagination. Those irksome thoughts about Vicky which continued to trickle into his consciousness vanished overnight. Sigili-Mundu, Zaché and everything which had brought him to the brink of destruction ceased to matter to him. He now seemed capable and ready to rise far above all threats, all indignities.

He remained in Tetseale for three more days. During this time too Mercy did not attend classes. Antony left Njikem's house but did not leave Tetseale. He moved into a hotel where Mercy and himself spent every minute of the day and of the night in each other's arms. Antony was not unaware that this was a glaring contradiction to the very pious life he had led all along. But inwardly he had decided that he would look at life differently. He would not stick too strongly to rules and principles anymore because they had not helped him. He would float and enjoy himself like the rest of mankind.

Their love for each other deepened and widened, and before they eventually parted, they were fully engaged. They would get married at their next encounter – during the forthcoming Easter vacation. She gave a letter which was to introduce him to her uncle Mr. Namnde Hosea in Atule.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Antony found Namnde to be very interesting. Very tall, lean and with a hungry look on his bearded face, he wore a tie which on his long neck looked like a rope. He spent his whole time smoking and eating kola-nuts. He would listen to Antony talk for a very long time without interrupting him by making any contribution to the topic. He certainly liked the fact that his niece had fallen in love with a senior civil servant. For university girls, husbands were not very easy to come by. It was obvious that he would do anything to encourage the relationship.

On his return to Sigili-Mundu Antony found more to rejoice in: the letter to Eru whose disappearance had brought him such nightmares was not missing. It had all along been among his manuscripts which he had taken with him. He destroyed it at once. He went to Saminou early in the morning to find out about their return journey with the books.

It was only then he realized that Saminou had never actually known what his intentions were. In keeping with his understanding that Antony had intended to open a bookshop, he had made arrangements for a hall to be hired for the purpose as soon as the books arrived. He had also contacted some booksellers who had not only assessed the value of the books but had gone ahead to label the prices on each volume. Two of the typewriters had already been sold immediately they arrived, although only half the money had been paid.

Antony explained anew what he wanted the books to be used for. Saminou was disappointed. He apologized to Antony and arranged for them to be moved to the Prefecture and later to the college campus after a room shall have been allocated and shelves constructed. The following week he wrote to *Rotary Edmoton* to acknowledge receipt, thank them for the books and to tell them into what use they had been put.

Whether Zaché was aware of the error in translation which distorted the purpose of the books, it was hard to say. But he found something in it to hurt Antony. When the materials arrived and Saminou started advertising them he wrote to the Canadian Embassy in Tetseale to complain. Using the address on one of the books he also wrote to the *Rotary club* in Edmonton.

On the 11th of June Antony wrote to the Minister of Education resigning his post as “Surveillant General” of College Principal de Sigili-Mundu. Three reasons prompted the move. On the 20th of May Zaché informed him that there would be a staff meeting that afternoon. At about 1 p.m. Anthony arrived his residence where he thought the meeting was to take place. Zaché told him that they would leave at 2.30 for the college.

“Why do we have to travel three kilometres when we are only two of us? What stops us from holding it here?”

“Iz zhe principal,” Zaché said. “Zhe conseil of professeurs hez to teke prace in the Salle de conference in zhe college.”

For over an hour and a half they marched on, Antony following Zaché as he sweated in the armpits, neck and above his ears. As they went on Zaché informed

Antony that the main reason for the meeting was because the *Lamido* wanted his daughter failed.

“T’d be damned! Passed or failed?” he asked.

“Felled,” Zaché repeated and went on to explain:

Salamatou, the girl in question had been betrothed to a certain butcher just after she was born. She had sent to college as a face-saving move. The *Lamido* had been under pressure to set an example by sending his own children to the new college. One year was enough for her, since the whole exercise was meant to be a joke. She was already a woman and her fiancée was getting very impatient. Should she pass into the next class she would be too educated for the husband who was already feeling most uncomfortable with the number of books she was carrying about.

“Why does he not just withdraw the girl?” Antony inquired.

Zaché told him that the *Lamido* would be setting a bad example. Everybody else may follow suit. So far nobody could see the advantages of having the college there while their cattle and crops were decaying in the fields. But it had to be made to look very natural. English, Antony's subject, carried a coefficient of four. If she failed in English, she was sure to fail in the entire examination. She would therefore be forced to withdraw and go into marriage.

Antony said nothing else until they reached the college campus. When Zaché repeated the problem he asked:

"Which one? did you say?"

"Salamatou," Zaché said again.

Antony reflected for a moment and then stamped his fist on the desk in front of him.

"Bullshit! Salamatou is among my very best students," he shouted. "I can understand somebody asking for a favour to pass an undeserved candidate, not to fail such a brilliant student. I cannot subscribe to that."

Indeed he did not subscribe to it. He gave Salamatou the highest marks in English. But when the results were published Salamatou had failed. The *Lamido* then had good reasons for sending her to the waiting arms of her husband. The *Lamido* also got to know with much resentment that but for Zaché he would never have had his way because Antony would not cooperate.

On the same day that the results were put up Antony received two letters. One came from the Canadian Embassy and the other from *Rotary International* in Edmonton. He tore open the letter from Embassy. Although addressed to him it was actually a copy of a letter sent to the Minister of Education.

THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION
MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION
TETSEALE

Honourable Minister;

Permit me, with due respect to draw your attention to a very disturbing revelation. It has to do with persistent complaints previously received from Canadian donor organisations (but hitherto unproven), that gifts made to educational institutions in this country were often diverted into private pockets.

On the 6th of April, as a follow up to a previous contact between a certain Mr. Antony Nkoaleck, English Language teacher posted to Collège Principal de Sigili-Mundu, a Canadian Air Force plane delivered six and a half tons of books and other educational material to a delegation from Sigili-Mundu which included the said Mr. Nkoaleck. These items were meant for setting up a college library. We attach here a copy of the letter from Mr. Zaché Azangma, the head of that institution to the effect that Mr. Anthony Nkoaleck has not only refused to release the materials for the setting up of the library but has gone ahead to open a private bookshop.

Because of the effect this is likely to have on the attitude of donor organizations in future, we strongly recommend that acts perpetrated by selfish and unfeeling individuals such as this be denounced and the delinquent government officials called to order.

The letter was signed by the Cultural Attaché. The second letter was addressed to him from the ROTARY INTERNATIONAL in Edmonton. It read:

Dear Mr Nkoaleck;

This organization is writing to say it was extremely embarrassed by the news that material requested for by you and sent for the creation of a college library has instead been used for the setting up of a personal bookshop. Rotary International make gifts to private individuals, depending on their needs and on what we have available. You would, in all fairness therefore, have been helped with books had you been honest enough to make your plans clear.

Upon receipt of the books, the use into which you put them would have been entirely your own affair. But the materials you received were meant to serve a specific educational purpose in Collège Principal de Sigili-Mundu. We would like to say that since the books already sent have so abused, we would no longer honour our previous promise of sending a second and/or third consignment.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Antony's *resignation* letter was a strong protest and a direct attack on Zaché as well as the *Prefet*. He said, for instance that:

I put in what I considered my best and, judged by the standards of positive achievement, I honestly have never thought there should be any cause of regret for ever appointing me to this office. But all my efforts have only earned me the most virulent hatred of my boss, Mr. Zaché Azangma, principal of the college. To every well-intentioned endeavour he has imputed the most sinister villainy...

Towards the end of the complaints he said:

Under normal circumstances ... I should appeal to the *Prefet* for intervention. But for some incomprehensible reason Mr. Zaché has succeeded in poisoning the mind of the former against me ... consequently the forces of law and order haven't been made to see in me a most detestable criminal...

Zaché knew that if such a document got to the Minister it might hurt him too. But he knew that the procedure would help him. Had Antony submitted the letter of resignation about a week after he had forwarded the copy to the Ministry, he would have created problems for Zaché.

There were many circulars around to explain to civil servants how the whole idea of complaints against bosses worked. For a complaint to receive serious attention at the level of the Ministry, it needed to be stamped and signed by the head of the institution of origin, even if it was against him.

The document needed also to be counter-signed by the *Prefet* in whose jurisdiction the complaint was being lodged. A copy was then forwarded to the Minister to inform him. The Minister received the advanced copy, but only acted on the stamped, signed copy. The head of the institution was then under pressure to forward the signed document as soon as he got it or receive a sanction. This

way the government ensured that only those with serious and genuine grievances against the head of an institution ventured to protest against him.

As soon as he had finished writing the letter Antony made three copies. He went straight to Zaché and submitted the official copy. Zaché went up to the *Prefet* and explained the full implications of its contents on their careers. The *Prefet* confessed he did not know how to handle the situation. This was once more Zaché's chance. He told the *Prefet* that if he wanted to they could make it possible for the Minister ever to see the letter. Sigili-Mundu, he said, was such a small place that it was possible for him to censor the mail that went out or came in.

He suggested that the *Prefet* should track down and detain Antony's letter. He said the *Prefet* should make it impossible for him to travel out of Sigili-Mundu. He also asked the Post Master to continue to look out for any letter going to the Ministry.

Zaché's advice was timely. The very next morning the Post Master came up with a letter to the *Prefet*. It was addressed to the Minister of Education. It had been written by Antony.

The day after the second letter was discovered, the *Prefet*, acting on Zaché's advice dispatched a man with a whole file on the activities of Antony as noted by them. The man was going to see the Governor and then the Minister of Education. He was also carrying a letter actually written by Zaché though signed by the *Prefet*.

Seventeen days after Antony posted the letter to the Minister another Ministerial Order relieved him with immediate effect of the post of "Surveillant Général" of the college. The radio gave no reasons for the decision.

Antony was horrified and overwhelmed with disillusionment. It was crying shame to the government that the Minister of National Education would put aside his own letter and take such a drastic measure against him without any on-the-spot verification. It showed how little it cared for honest hard work. It showed how exposed to the whims of incompetent authorities those in the lower echelon of the civil service were.

For the first time the word FAILURE entered into the vocabulary of his personal life. This was a word that had hovered only in the backwaters of his imagination, designating a remote circumstance in the life of a fool. It now sprang into the pages of his own existence with grim dramatic reality. He wondered whether life was worth living at all.

For days he did not leave his house. When the nurse visited him it was established that he had developed gastritis. He was also running a temperature, had persistent frontal headache and at the same time his blood pressure rose astronomically. Thereafter he ate, drank and worked like a sleep-walker in a dispirited land of defeat, a maze of confusion. Yet he obstinately refused to accept what all the evidence accumulated against him suggested – that it was his judgment of his society that was at fault. All he said to Zaché was:

“You have caused an office to be taken from me which I don’t even need, and which you never use properly.”

Zaché continued to receive more glories. He received credit and a special letter of appreciation from the Parents of Teachers Association of the college when the latrine and well which he personally supervised were completed. But Antony was not to be outdone. Far from deriving much satisfaction from the fact that the projects initiated by him had finally been realized, he kept a watchful eye on the level of the water in the well. The diggers had said that the well would not be ready for use until the water had attained a certain height.

As soon as he noticed that the water had risen high enough he decided on a ceremonial opening of the well. One afternoon he led a handful of students out and tied a rope across the path that led to the well. Amidst singing and rejoicing he cut the rope with a razor blade and drank the first cup of the water from the well.

Zaché naturally took offence. Jealous and provoked by the fact that Antony had not yet lost his popularity with the pupils, he came up to him and asked him what right he had to waste the student’s precious time in that way. Antony replied with calculated arrogance:

“Two projects have been completed. I have only opened one. If you feel yourself cheated, you still have the chance to lead your children to latrine and sing and drop the first lump of excrement into it.”

Zaché had no reason to feel bothered because he had made a huge amount of money from the books. One of the classrooms had been converted into a library the way Antony had insisted. While this was being done he applied to the Ministry for financial assistance to set up a library. With this strong contacts in Tetseale he obtained the sum of two million francs. He had then taken stock, stamped the books and sent an inventory to the Ministry showing how well the money had been used. His would be remembered as the largest college library in the whole country.

Antony continued to suffer more mortification. He never heard from Rotary International, nor from the Canadian Embassy to whom he had written to clear himself.

Antony's dismissal as Surveillant General snapped the anchor that held everybody and everything in place. Whatever Zaché's private designs for instigating Antony's expulsion, the vacuum created by his absence taught the students one thing – that they were now free to behave the way they liked, without fear of being surprised by the omnipresent Antony. Total chaos set in. nine-tenths of the students, though only in their first year, were already adults, most of them had been compelled by the *Lamido* to abandon their wives and finances in the village to attend the college only for a short time before giving it up.

For these and many more, it was Antony's presence and tireless advice that had made them continue to attend classes for that long. He would sit for long hours after school, telling them how their wealth would more than double with only a little more education.

To compensate for all that had lost during the months that they had been in school, the students were suddenly seized with murderous hatred for anything, which stood for order, for law, for respect of any kind for human values. And in the excesses that followed they were sustained by the belief that the worst the government could do was to close down the college permanently. If that happened it would be considered a welcome blessing.

That weekend the college night watchman was bound hands and feet and his genitals carved out by a gang which was later believed to be made up of students. The same night, the back window of Zaché office was opened the following morning eleven heaps of excrement were discovered, very carefully piled on the floor to form the letter "Z".

During this period too Zaché refused to set foot on the college compound. Two days after the attack on the night watchman, his pregnant niece was raped in town by seven students who swore to kill her and her parents if she dared to disclose their identities. The following morning she suffered a miscarriage.

On Monday the following week the carcasses of four dogs were seen floating in the well. Simultaneously, the floor of the latrine was ripped open and three benches from the classroom forced into it. The Friday after that, one of the men who had been sent to help Antony as "Surveillant General" was stabbed to death in a brawl in a bar. The man had come there with his female colleague whom the students had insisted on taking home for the night. A quarrel had broken out and then a fight which ended in his death.

Zaché tackled the crisis ingeniously. Firstly, he wrote a detailed report to the Ministry explaining how Antony had incited the students to bring disorder and destroy government property. Secondly, he knew that it was necessary to ease the tension first while the Ministry worked on what to do to Antony. The best way to do this was to close down the college.

To close down the college on account of indiscipline was to admit defeat and his own inefficiency. The *Prefet* would never have sanctioned the closure of the college. Zaché knew that the last thing the northerners would like to hear was that they were a savage, primitive and incorrigible people. So he chose a point which would appear satisfactory to the *Prefet*. With a bribe of 25.000 francs he succeeded in getting the medical officer to complain to the *Prefet* that he had detected an outbreak of influenza in the college, and that it should be closed down immediately.

The strategy worked. The very day that the man received the notice he ordered Zaché to declare the college closed until further notice. This greatly amused Antony, but not for long because he soon heard that he was being blamed for the disorders. Zaché had informed the *Prefet* that it was Antony who had instigated the students to rebel against authority and destroy government property. The *Prefet* also communicated this information to the *Lamido*. In their eyes he suddenly became a hated man.

Antony immediately made up his mind: if he was to render his country any more services, it must not be in Sigili-Mundu. He decided to go to Tetseale again and seek a personal interview with the Minister of Education to whom he would explain all his grievances, cost it what it may. He would then ask for an immediate transfer out of the place.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Antony's excitement at meeting Mercy did not end with their separation in Tetseale. Back in Sigili-Mundu he thought of her constantly. She had let loose a flood of long suppressed emotions in him, he found himself completely obsessed with thoughts of her. Her image became for him a kind of talisman, the one thing which took his mind away from the painful realities of his life. He wrote to her often without caring to wait for replies to letters sent.

Even before his removal, his work had taken on a peculiar pattern. He came to school only when he liked. After all, he thought, nothing could be worse than what he had suffered already. If he found excrement on the teacher's table as he quite often did, he placed his hang bag on the nearest desk in the front row of the classroom, and taught the four, five or six students who could withstand the stench and sit in.

He never cared any more to find out how many students were absent. He merely noted the names of those who were present in the appropriate column in the register and went away, never finding out afterwards what was done to those who were absent. In the past he used to bring a lot of pictures and cuttings from magazines to aid the students' understanding. These he completely abandoned and took to the prescribed textbook, never bothering to find out if the children understood or not.

It was no longer his business if a student entered the class with his cap on or smoking. Whenever he felt that the lesson should end, it ended and he went home. And so with the students' natural propensity to take advantage of situations of this sorts, over half the handful of students left literally boycotted classes.

Now unrestrained by the burden of honest hard work and with only his sweetheart to think about, he found himself with so much time that he decided to take to writing again. This time he decided to write a novel in which he would use the names of corrupt

government officials as titles of the chapters in which he would narrate stories of atrocities the individuals had committed. This, he thought would be the best way of laughing at the past which had threatened his very existence. With this new decision he found Sigili-Mundu a good place to work in – until the Ministerial Order was received.

He was still in Sigili-Mundu when a radio announcement invited him to Likume. It came from Dr. Mandieg. He knew it had to do with Eru's sickness. He went straight to Dr. Mandieg's office as soon as he arrived.

"We finally received the analysis of the specimens we sent abroad concerning our friend's illness," Dr. Mandieg began.

Antony folded his hands and sat back. "So what does it say, Doctor?" he inquired worriedly.

Dr. Mandieg tapped his pen on the table several times and said:

"I am afraid he has Lepahan, just as I had feared."

"What is Lepahan, doctor?"

"I tried to explain to you before, but perhaps because we were as yet uncertain about it I could not really say much. By the way, do you by any chance have any idea about your friend's sex life?"

"I don't quite understand, doctor."

"Was he the type that enjoyed the company of women?"

"Why is Dr. Mandieg going into all this?"

"Because Lepahan is a complication that usually results from sexual promiscuity or permissiveness."

"My friend enjoyed nothing else on this planet but sex," he said half-smiling.

Dr. Mandieg gave a sharp grunt.

"At any rate, what is Lepahan, how dangerous is it?"

"It is a form of cancer, cancer in any form is dangerous."

But that in itself does not constitute death. I guess that it all boils down to the individual's constitution and his power to combat it. If his system was already disabled, perhaps by the delay in detecting intestinal complication, then we are in for trouble. But by the way, was he generally a sickling?

"I wouldn't say so. He was a gentleman who enjoyed himself very much. I know that he had a very delicate system, would suffer from indigestion for a whole week, was very choosy about his meals and would complain of an occasional fever. But that is perfectly normal. I never heard that he was admitted in the hospital, so I think he was not quite a sickling. But what does Doctor mean?"

"Check him up, and find out by way of conversation, cunningly, whether he feels pains around the waist, knees and ankles. If he behaves as if nothing has happened to him, then you know that certain antibodies in his system have been able to fight the infection off.

"Before we go any further into this, you go and see him," Mandieg resumed. "I wanted to talk the matter over with you first. Go, if he complains of pains along the waist or joints, then you can start worrying. If not, no cause for alarm. I know of people who have lived with the infection for 25 years after detection."

At Eru's place he found the door locked and the veranda still littered with dirt. A few goats and fowls lay on the veranda, indicating that he might never have returned to the house since the operation. Another neighbour told him that Eru was living with Commy. He went straight there.

Her two children were playing at the veranda.

"Is mammy home?" he asked.

"Yes she is," one of them answered

"Is your father in, too?"

The children said he was. As soon as he stepped into the parlour he could hear a long agonizing cry from the direction of Commy's toilet behind the house. It was unquestionably Eru's voice. He crossed the parlour with hurried steps. Eru was in the toilet where some five persons were helping him go to stool.

"What's the matter, bo Eru?" he inquired.

"My waist," he groaned. And then Commy told Antony that after the successful operation another complication developed: his joints. She said Eru could not stand on his feet, nor sit up. "He only lives on pain-killers," she added. Eru himself could not talk. He was panting asthmatically, and when he tried to talk his lips shivered like those of a man in the grip of acute fever.

“Then forget about him,” Mandieg said when Antony described what he saw and told him that he only lived on painkillers. “He’s gone. You can’t bring him back. Pain-killers are a type of life-supporting device. You cannot live on them. For one thing, they are expensive. And who can spend everything on a patient he knows has no chances of surviving?”

Antony returned to Sigili-Mundu without talking to Commy. Instead he urged Dr. Mandieg to disclose the secret to Commy and his relatives so that they could stop wasting their time and money on him. He returned to Sigili-Mundu, having postponed his trip to Tetseale to sometime during the Easter vacations.

Chapter Forty

Antony's *dismissal* as "Surveillant General," and his dejection at Eru's sad state was made worse by the loss of Argus. It came as unexpectedly as its acquisition. Less than a fortnight after his return from Likume, he was roused from his afternoon rest by a black cat chasing a mouse to and fro the whole length of the roof of his house. He walked out in a fury and immediately picked up a stone and flung in the direction of the cat. It missed hitting the cat but caused the mouse to change direction and flee towards the eaves and fall on to the front yard. The cat plunged to the ground after the helpless mouse that fell not too far from where Argus was tied. Argus barked furiously as soon as the mouse dropped to the ground. Sighting the cat and with the dog before it, the little mouse chose the better of two evils: it dashed between the legs of the dog. As the cat made a show of catching up with it, Argus thought that he was the target of the cat's aggression. It sprang into the air towards the cat.

"Catch'm, Argus!" Antony shouted. Instead of escaping the little harmless-looking cat purred and with all the hairs along its spine on ends it arched its back and stood its ground.

"Catch'm!" Antony repeated. In its fury Argus sprang again, cutting itself loose from the chain and charging at the cat which also jumped so that they both clashed in mid-air.

Within seconds the combat was over. The cat lay in two trembling, bleeding halves with its intestines lying ungainly, between the severed halves. But instead of a victory song Antony saw Argus spin round and round, throw itself down again with a sustained high-pitched wail of unbearable pain. Ignorant of the dog's predicament Antony whistled, called its name and beckoned to it to come. Argus did not seem to heed to the call. It did not even seem to know the direction from which the call was coming. Antony managed to reach it and grab it by the piece of chain which hung from the belt round its neck. What he saw drove a pain through his heart. The mischievous

little cat had, miraculously, implanted its claws in the dog's eyes, bursting both. Argus, the only creature that understood Antony's need for company, love and protection was blind.

Desperate, Antony attached its chain back to the belt round its neck and let it by the hand to the Veterinary Post, Argus whimpering, wailing and whining at every pace. The Veterinary Post was closed but he knew Musa's house. Musa was not at home either. Antony decided to wait. After a full anxious hour he decided to leave Argus and note explaining what had happened with Musa's brother.

For two hours he searched in vain for Musa. When he had almost given up he found Musa drinking in a roadside bar.

"Argus is blind," Antony said, almost crying.

"You want to buy him spectacles?" the man asked.

"You and your dog!" he added. Musa thought Antony had sent Argus to go looking for him and Argus had returned without news about him.

"Seriously," Antony repeated. "A wild cat burst its two eyes." He shook his head sadly.

"Where is it?"

"I left it at your place," Antony told him.

They both hurried back to Musa's house. Argus was no stronger to the compound, but it was nowhere to be found. The wounds and the blood trickling from the eyes attracted flies instantly. The molestations from the flies and the agony it was going through combined to force it to cut its chain and flee.

Antony and his friend mounted a fruitless hunt for it. Towards dark when they began to inquire about it, somebody said he had seen a dog lying in a gutter like the one they were describing. He led them there.

The dog in the gutter was indeed Argus. They could see right from where they stood that it was not alive! Antony rolled up the legs of his trousers and jumped in. he felt the dog and turned it over. It was already stiff and foaming at the mouth.

Its body was filled with scratch-wounds, indicating that it must have been attacked by other dogs who took advantage of its helpless state. But even more than that, its head was dented from the top as though somebody had struck it dead with a heavy stick or even a stone. That could not be ruled out because many people feared the dog and would not hesitate to do away with it if they found it blind.

"I feel as if it is me myself that has been killed like this," Antony said to his friend, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and cleaning a tear that rolled down his left cheek.

"I know," the man replied, and, in fact, he alone knew how much the dog meant to Antony.

"So what will you do with it?" the man asked him offhandedly.

"What else?" Antony asked. "I have to take it home and give it the burial it deserves as my only friend."

The man shrugged and said: "You don't think that is a waste?"

"Why a waste?" Antony inquired.

"Because, " the man began, looking away, "some people can buy it and cook it in the restaurants."

Antony looked at him with malevolent eyes and then asked in anger: "Why don't you take me to them to cook and sell in the restaurants? After all what's the difference between this Argus and me?"

Musa shrugged and said: "Is only an idea."

"Keep your ideas to yourself," Antony said. He did not mention it but his anger was directed at Musa not just because had he met Musa in his office or at home when he went with the dog, the story might never have been so bad.

Chapter Forty-One

The college closed down for Easter vacation in March, one month after the death of Argus. Antony left for Tetseale that same day. The week before he had received his long awaited arrears – 640,000 francs. As soon as he got the money he sent a cheque of 40,000 francs to Vicky to pay back the money she sent to him.

He had long written to Mercy to inform her of the date of his arrival in Tetseale, and she was expecting him. He had opened a private mail box in Atule on his return from the trip during which he met Mercy. Then he made very good friends with one of his former students who had abandoned school to become motor driver between Atule and Sigili-Mundu. The boy took letters from him and posted them in Atule, and then checked his box in Atule each time he went down.

Never before in his life had Antony felt the kind of excitement that seized him as he drove to Tetseale to meet Mercy. And when they eventually met he found himself embracing her and kissing her over and over again in the full view of everybody else at the lorry station. They then drove back to his favourite hotel where they did everything imaginable to celebrate their meeting after such a very long separation. Antony told her that he had come down to seek a transfer out of Sigili-Mundu by any available means – fair or foul. He told her how his efforts had been grossly misunderstood and his very life threatened. He told her his plan was to work out a transfer that would bring them together or at least closer.

Mercy was very glad to learn of his new plans, and told him that she was going to be of great help. She told him that the brother of a good friend of hers worked in the office that handled transfers. She assured him that the gentleman in question would not be reluctant to help. With that promise Antony saw his whole future turn bright once more, and he was thankful to Mercy for the way he felt.

That night they went out dancing and drinking until after midnight. When they were just about to settle down to sleep, Mercy told him a piece of depressing news – she was pregnant.

His very first instinct was to ask her “By whom?” But he checked himself. That night make his sweetheart feel disgraced. They were not yet married, but the first time they slept together he had sworn to her that he was ready to hear every single responsibility arising from their amusement. This, he thought, was an opportunity for him to show her how serious he was about their relationship.

“How long ago, Mercy?”

“This is making the third month,” she said. She was lying. She was four months pregnant.

She said three because it was three months ago since Antony slept with her.

“And you did not care to mention it to me in any of your letters, Mercy?”

There was just the faintest trace of reproach, perceptible only in the cadence in his voice.

She remained silent. Antony too was thoughtful for a very long time and then he said:

“First, Mercy, don’t misunderstand what I am about to say. I don’t doubt what you have said. We agreed that we would get married when next we met. We still will. But there is a problem. I am thinking particularly of your educational plans. We need children quite all right. But that would be best after we are married. I am in fact wondering whether we really need this particular child, at this particular time.”

“But the child has come Tony, so we need it If you are sincere to yourself and to me that you will be my husband, the question of whether or not we need the child should not arise at all. What are you suggesting?”

There was silence.

“As you have rightly said, it is a suggestion. I am solidly qualified, and can live comfortably above the level of most other men, “Surveillant General” and all. If you were keen on being well-placed in this society, so that if by some accident I die suddenly you would not be left in the cold, we should give this matter a second thought.”

Mercy folded her hands and sat back, starring Anthony in the face.

"Tony, I don't agree," she said after a minute's reflection. "I am not that kind of girl. There is no question of my being well-placed in this society. If you accept the responsibility, I shall forego my education and stay at home for this remaining year. Next year, after I have had the child I will continue. Others have been doing so."

Antony was silent with shame for ever making such a suggestion.

"I accept all the responsibility," he said, "because I want to marry you. I said the very first day we met, and still say so now. I was only suggesting. So let it not look as if we have disgraced at all on any point."

Mercy was perfectly satisfied. But even more than that she was surprised at the extent to which Antony was willing to believe her. The confession of pregnancy had been intended as a mere gamble. She had come just to see what Antony would say about it. she was not madly in love with him, and she was not desperately looking for a husband.

She had actually contemplated an abortion. But several events had discouraged her. Many cases of deaths resulting from abortions had been reported. The government had sent out several girls faking pregnancies to track down the unscrupulous doctors and pharmacies who undertook it. It had become very difficult for any girl to find a doctor who would risk his license. She had been especially scared by the fact that one of her intimate friends had just died in a doctor's private theatre.

If Antony had objected and insisted that they see a doctor to ascertain the age of the pregnancy, she would have gone back to the real father of the child. The man actually responsible was the gentleman in the office of transfers whom she had described as the brother of her friend. Even though the man had accepted that he was the father of the child he had made it clear that he could not marry her because he already had two wives. The fear that she might be pregnant definitely had much to do with the readiness with which she had fallen in love with Antony the very first time they met.

Antony had accepted the responsibility. He was, besides, the publicly acknowledged boy-friend. That made life easy for her.

"So what do we do then, Mercy?"

"We return to your place together."

"when?"

“Whenever you are going back.”

“It cannot be so, Mercy. I must be sure of this transfer business first. Tomorrow you’ll try to meet the man. If it is possible now, then you will have to remain here, or go to your uncle in Atule while I move out of Sigili-Mundu. I wouldn’t suggest that you come right to Sigili-Mundu. It is already too much for me alone. What do you think?”

“I agree. I will go to my uncle, then.”

“Does he know of it?”

“No. I was waiting to tell you first.”:

“How will he take it?”

“I don’t know. But if you talk to him he will do nothing. As you must have noticed. He is a very understanding man.”

“I know,” he said. “I shall stop at Atule and talk to him about it, on my way back.”

“Don’t talk to him first. Wait until I have spoken to him myself,” she advised.

The following day Mercy took him to the man in the office of transfers. Mercy probably had mentioned Antony’s name to him before, for he was not very surprised to meet him. Rather he expressed very great pleasure at seeing him. As Mercy had told him the day before, it would not be any problem. He told Antony that if he sent down his application to him personally as soon as he got back to Sigili-Mundu, he would be transferred to Tetseale by the beginning of the next School year.

During the holidays Zaché received a very brief communication from the Ministry of Education that a team of inspectors would be visiting his college in the first or second week of the new term. It was sent by his tribesman, the secretary of the Minister.

This decision by the ministry had practically nothing to do with the fact that Antony had gone to Tetseale during the holidays. It had nothing too to do with the fact that there was friction between Zaché and Antony. In fact, Antony was not even aware of the projected visit, and had not even attempted to see the Minister any more. It was just a routine tour. At various periods of the year the

Minister sent out inspectors to colleges in different parts of the country to observe how they were being run, and to discuss issues that had been communicated to the Ministry in writing, and to undertake on-the-spot investigations where these were necessary.

But to Zaché's calculating mind, it could only be Antony who had gone and spoken to the Minister against him and thus compelled him to send people to Sigili-Mundu for information which would evidently lead to his dismissal as principal so that he Antony could take his place. Upon this confident assumption he vowed to use Antony's own trap to destroy him. For two weeks he laboured on a plot which would make Antony absent when the inspectors arrived at Sigili-Mundu.

Chapter Forty-Two

Zaché *did* not need to labour on any plot because fate continued to trail Antony. The very night that he arrived at Sigili-Mundu his father died. The startling news was delivered over the Middle-Belt Station. It said:

“The Chairman of the Traditional Council of Nkokonoko Small Monje announces with profound regret and sympathy to all Biongong elements at home and abroad, the disappearance after a protracted, illness of Chief Fuo-Ndeem, Paramount Chief of that district. It occurred in his palace this day of 29th May. In keeping with the traditional rites and ceremonies, all the late Chief’s children are by this announcement being requested to be physically present for the finding ceremony which takes place ten days from the day of this announcement.

The following, wherever they may be, are very specially requested to be present by the eight of June: they are Antony Nkoaleck, Alexander Nchidia, Marcus Anuse, Ephraim Njikem, Nwoh Ngeashia and Amonwoh Plimus...”

In response to this announcement Antony went up to Zaché and obtained permission to go to Small Monje. Zaché asked him to put his request in writing, which he did and then left Sigili-Mundu.

As if by some previous arrangement, when he arrived Atule he found Mercy who had arrived there just a few days before. In spite of the death he was very pleased to see Mercy there. He informed both her and her uncle of the sad news.

He did not look very ruffled by the death. Only one thought occupied his mind – how the death fitted into his plans for a future that was becoming so bleak. There was not the slightest doubt that he was going to be crowned the Chief’s successor. What was he going to do with an office in which he had never shown any interest? He had hoped to achieve greatness in the civil service, but Zaché had thwarted his best efforts. He was now poised towards achieving

literary greatness. He would abandon the Ministry of Education. He would accept the title of Paramount Chief, however odious it sounded. He would use that position with all the leisure time that it afforded, to write novels through which he could still effect some change in the rotten administrative and political system of the country. He could survive on the 50.000 francs that he would be paid every month as Chief. That was not much different from the 40.000 francs salary advance he earned per month for year in Sigili-Mundu.

"It is as I expected," he announced to Namnde and Mercy. That same night he told Mercy:

"I was only waiting for my father's death to quit this scandalous thing they call government service. Now it has come. I have long been marked for the successor."

Mercy looked baffled. Antony had never talked of resigning his appointment. He had never mentioned to her that he was prince, the heir apparent to the throne of his tribe. The main problem facing him as far as she knew, was that of his transfer. That had already been solved. It was only a matter of time before he would be sent to Tetseale.

But Antony explained with such seriousness of purpose that she became both frightened and upset. Since she herself was not so sincere she began to doubt Antony's sincerity. This new story seemed to her to shatter the machinery of the plot she had so carefully worked out for herself. She however, teased Antony further. she said:

"The world will laugh at me to hear that I abandoned my university studies to become the wife of a local chief."

Anthony's silence intensified her suspicion. Whether this chieftaincy affair was a hoax or not, she felt that the safest thing to do would be to ensure that they were legally married before Antony went anywhere.

In the afternoon of the day before Antony was to leave for Small Monje for the funeral of his father she came up to him and insisted that they get married first.

"That will only complicate issues," he told her. "I don't want to go there a married man. I don't want my people to think otherwise about me. We shall be married no doubt. But I should be a Chief first."

"So your people will not think otherwise about you if you marry me after they have made you the Chief?"

"As Chief, as Paramount Chief, it wouldn't matter. They will have to take from me."

"And if they refused?"

"They can't do it. And even if they do, I reserve the right to leave the throne rather than have them bend my will."

"Tony, you never mentioned the chieftaincy problem to me until this moment that I am pregnant," she said.

"Mercy, I did not because it had just nothing whatsoever to do with our relationship."

"Now it does."

"Well, I am glad to hear that. But in any case, you heard the radio announcement, even if I had never mentioned it to you."

"Well, there was something of the sort."

Antony was silent for a very long time, contemplating the undercurrent of doubt in her response. Then, refusing to be angered by her response, he said:

"However, I have first to attend my father's funeral. It is not for nothing that my name was mentioned first."

"I do not say you should not go. All I need now is an assurance that you will marry me. And the only assurance you can give me that you will marry me is for you to marry me. It will be a big disgrace for me and my family when everybody gets to know that I am pregnant, and without a husband."

"You are perfectly right, Mercy. But first things first. Let me be Chief first. I have already had so many problems with my people at home that any incautious act now could turn the scales of succession on someone else."

There was no greater wish in Mercy's mind than that the scales should be turned as he feared, on someone else. She asked:

"But if you do not marry me now because you fear to offend your people, how do you expect me to believe you that you will do so after they shall have given you your own tribesgirls?"

"I am not interested in my tribesgirls, Mercy."

“Then prove it by marrying me. That’s all.”

“I can’t do that now, Mercy,” he said with a tone of finality in his voice which sent Mercy out of the room.

About two hours after Mercy left him, Antony sat at the table in their room, reading, when he heard the noise of a vehicle outside the house. It did not sound like that of Namnde’s car. He rose and went out to see who it was.

It was a Toyota jeep. Although he knew that he had not done any wrong to anybody, he was afraid. His disillusionment at the hands of Zaché and his clique had already conditioned him to any unexpected harassment.

His fears were not lightened when he saw that the first person to climb down was Namnde. Some other person climbed down after him. He was a police Commissioner dressed in his full uniform. A third man dropped, dressed in a suit. And then another policeman followed, dressed in uniform, a pair of handcuffs dangling in his left hand. Behind him was a fifth man. He was dressed simply, a short-sleeved shirt buttoned up to the neck and a well-ironed brown pair of trousers. The last person to climb down was a lady – Mercy.

They had come to ensure that Antony was fully and officially married to Mercy. They did not believe a word of what Antony said. They did not believe even the radio announcement inviting him to Small Monje.

“You mean you did not hear the announcement?” Antony queried.

“I did, but that is not the same thing as saying I believed that it was genuine,” Namnde pointed out. “Your actions now only go to confirm my doubt.”

Antony looked across at him and then at Mercy.

“You think somebody at the radio station could have been crazy as to make such a solemn announcement without having been sufficiently informed about the death?”

“That is not what is being said,” the Commissioner of Police said, uttering his first words. “What they are saying is that is not impossible for men wishing to escape responsibility for their actions,

to arrange with somebody at the radio station to make such an announcement. We have dozens of radio men languishing in jails for such things.”

Antony sensed a conspiracy and definite threat against his person.

“At any rate,” he cried to explain, “this particular announcement was genuine, whatever way you look at it. And I have to go to Small Monje tomorrow. I have not just discovered here in Atule that Mercy is pregnant. If therefore it had ever occurred to me to be so mean as to abandon her, this house would not have been the best place to stop. I don’t think I am as stupid as that. It would not have been necessary for me to ask somebody to concoct the story of my father’s death over the radio as a means of my escape.”

“Whatever you are saying does not touch the main point now,” Namnde said: “We have come to tell you, and to do so in very unmistakable terms, that the government of this country has the moral obligation to protect the well-being of its young girls in all educational institutions. It is a law of this country, and there is only one way of providing to these authorities that your intentions are not deliberately running directly counter to that of the state. And this one way is for you to obtain a duly signed marriage certificate from the court before you stir out of this town.”

“Before I stir out this town?”

“That is what I have said. That is what these authorities who have come with me think. That is what the law of state thinks.”

Antony had been sitting. Now he rose and said:

“This sounds like intimidation in my ears.”

“And what if it is?” the Magistrate inquired calmly.

“Where the law of state is being trampled upon, nothing is too much to be done.”

“I have not trampled on the law of state...”

“We are here to make sure that you don’t “ the Commissioner said.

There was silence. Then Antony said almost to himself:

“And I leave tomorrow, and from my own little knowledge of the procedure for marriages, I know that the couple registers in court and waits for about three months. During that time of waiting the court expects to receive letters from parents and relatives on both sides, sanctioning or disagreeing with the proposal. And it is usually upon receipt of....”

“We make the law Mr. Antony” the Magistrate announced. “We can break it whenever we want, depending on the circumstances such as these.”

Antony blinked his eyes and remained silent.

“A marriage certificate,” the Magistrate resumed, “let me quote the Civil Status Act to you, is established when the couple concerned declares before a magistrate or his representative that they wish to be united in matrimony. We then pronounce them united in marriage in the presence of the heads of their families or their deputies.”

“In this case who will be the heads of our families? Who is the head of my family? How do I get a deputy? I leave here early tomorrow morning. Just how do I...”

“We make the law, I have told you,” the Magistrate reiterated. “We know when it can be waived. Leave the rest to us, once you have sorted out your differences with your fiancée.”

“We have no differences to sort out between us, as far as I am concerned. My worry is, when shall this be done to give me time to travel to...”

“Today,” the Magistrate said. “Now even.”

“This night?”

“This night,” the man said emphatically.

Helpless, Antony allowed them to have things their own way. His only worry was the feeling that Mercy did not trust him, that she did not believe him, in spite of all his protestations of love for her.

“Do people not need rings for marriages of this sort?” Antony asked.

“For marriages of any kind a ring is a mere symbol. But if you desperately need one we would stop by a small shop along...”

“Not that I desperately need one”

“O.K. Can we go, then?”

“It means I do not even need a coat and tie?”

“Unless you insist on it.”

“I will insist on nothing,” Antony told him with growing bitterness, a bitterness which was intensified by the thought that Mercy was enjoying it all.

They left Namnde's house, driving in the back seat of the Magistrate's land rover to the latter's office. It was already eight o'clock in the night. The man took out a pile of documents, filled out certain sections and then asked Mercy:

"What kind of marriage do you need?"

"Monogamy," she answered.

He wrote it down and then went out with the file without asking Antony anything. Within a few minutes he returned. The ceremony was all over. Their marriage certificates had already been signed, including even the space labelled Parents or Deputies. Antony was asked to sign both copies. He did, and copy was handed over to him. Namnde kept Mercy's own copy.

"Congratulations Mr. Mrs. Antony Nkoaleck," the Magistrate said, stretching out his hand to shake Antony's. Antony looked away without stirring a muscle. Namnde tried to shake his hand too but he declined. When the Magistrate asked them to embrace each other as the formality usually required, Antony said:

"That is entirely our business. You have got what you wanted." His anger now had turned his mind into gall. He felt himself disgraced.

On their part the people found this anger unnecessary and offensive. As he himself had rightly said, they had got what they wanted. Namnde's niece was now legally married. If Antony still contemplated any mischief after that hour, he would have only the law to answer to.

That same night before they went to bed, Antony decided that he would tell Mercy more about himself. He began:

"Mercy, the incident of the evening is disconcerting. How did it all happen? Why had it to happen that way? The answer is simple. You had not known me enough. And since you had not known me enough, you took me for either or both of two things, a liar or a fool. Because you took me for a liar, you thought I had faked the news of the death of my father, that I was just looking for a means of escaping from you.

"You have done me great wrong. You have teamed up with my oppressors. I am not incapable of loving with my whole heart. I am no liar, and I am no fool. If I were a liar, if I never meant what I said about marrying you, I would have found a pretext to run away the

very minute you mentioned you were pregnant. I would have insisted that we go to a doctor to ascertain that the child is mine, that it is not older or younger than the month we lay together for the first time in Tetsale. That would not have been so easy for you to prove. I would have fled to my Sigili-Mundu and never set foot here again.

“But I did none of these things. I kept my word. That is not a sign of dishonesty. It is a sign of love which I wanted to impress upon you. Your uncle’s insistence on a legal document might be understandable in the sense that he might have been anxious to protect the welfare of his daughter or niece or whatever.

“But as my wife you should have thought twice. Insisting on a document that would prove we are married is no guarantee that we will be happy together. The paper itself has no place in our happiness. If I did not love you before, the acquisition of 500 marriage certificates would not change my opinion of you for the better. In fact, it would only worsen our relationship because it would imply that the law has bound me for life to somebody I genuinely hate.

“Consider those ridiculous circumstance under which I was forced to sign the document! I knew I was being threatened. Don’t think that there was nothing else I could have done. I could have said NO and faced the consequences. Perhaps they could have imprisoned me. Perhaps they could have fined me. But the truth is that there was a possibility of you going to bed this night without anything bearing my signature to indicate that you were a married woman.

“But I allowed myself to be pushed around and insulted and baited. And the reasons I submitted were two – Love and Honesty. Not fright. Now that we have signed the documents, I want to say it again and I will say so in the hope that you will never doubt my word. I love you and I am sincere about it. I pardon you completely for what has happened. Come,” he took her in his arms and kissed her for a very long time.

Overcome by the force of his words and her own guilt for the dubious part she played in the incident, Mercy had started weeping. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and dried her eyes. Finally, withdrawing from his grip she muttered:

“Tony, please pardon me.”

“I had long pardoned you,” Antony said.

Chapter Forty-Three

Antony *knew* before he left Atule that the Procurator and the Commissioner had expressed doubts about the genuineness of the news of his father's death just to force him to marry Mercy. He was not surprised therefore to see on his arrival in Small-Monje that a major funeral ceremony was being prepared for the late Chief.

There he thought to his heart's greatest joy that the old saying, "a patient dog eats the fattest bone" must have been invented to describe his own life. He had been tricked by Pah Godsabi, contaminated by Vicky, ridiculed by Eru, tortured and unjustly humiliated by Zaché, tantalised by the Minister of Education, and doubted by Mercy. But he had not despaired. And as fate would have it, he had been rewarded – he was received and treated in Nkokonoko Small Monje like a King – at a moment he most wanted it.

Traditionally, the Elders of the tribe were not supposed to betray their feelings toward any prince who was likely to become Chief, until he was caught. But Antony's case seemed to have become the exception to that rule. Perhaps it was because the gap between him and the other princes was too wide for anybody to even pretend not to know that he was to be the next Chief.

Nchindia and another prince had already arrived when he came, and two more came afterwards. But on no other occasion was the met with such excitement as his. Nchindia and the other princes who had come before him had been received as though they were just two of the hundreds of mourners who flocked in everyday from the nearby villages. So were those who came a few days after Antony's arrival. Antony's case was special. It was as though Fuo-Ndee himself had come back to life.

He reached Small Monje when it was already dark, very dark. But within minutes of his arrival, the whole palace had been informed. Barely one hour later, seven of the late Chief's most

important masquerades staged a dancing display to welcome him. This was an honour which was usually accorded only to visiting Paramount Chiefs.

He came to Small Monje alone, without Vicky, the woman the tribe knew to be his wife. But it was only on the third day that the question was raised. It was Ngobefuo the arch-protector of the throne who brought it up. They were alone when he said, "Son of man, we have not yet seen the daughter of Godsabi here."

Antony did not answer at once. With his recent marriage he would divorce Vicky as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He had not even stopped in Likume to see if she was still there or had already gone to Small Monje. And on his arrival in Small Monje, upon hearing that she was still in Likume waiting for him to come and bring her up, he had rejoiced. He thought it wise to start preparing the minds of the people for the reception of the news, soon to be in the air, that he had put her away. He told Ngobefuo:

"She refused to come, father."

"Refused to come and mourn your father?"

"She refused, father, I have been reluctant to mention this to anybody, but she never came to see me in my station in Sigili-Mundu where I worked. She refused to share the same bed with me. She seems to hate me very much because of the interest I show in our tribal affairs. In fact, I have been wondering how I can continue to think of her as a wife."

Ngobefuo absorbed everything he said and remained silent. He never raised the issue again. Nor did anybody else do so. Antony remained in Small-Monje for twelve days, and although all the five princes, participated as a group in all the activities- eating, dancing and drinking - he was always the focus of attention. He broke the kola of entertainment brought in by anybody who came to pay his respect to the princes. At Fuo-Ndee's grave-side it was to him that Ngobefuo gave the horn of honour containing the wine which he poured as libation. He poured reluctantly, though, because the exercise was contrary to the ideas of his Christian faith.

He was to stand in the forefront of the other princes when Ngobefuo led the dance that formally declared the ceremony open. He was the one asked to give words of thanks on behalf of all the princes whenever a gift was made to them by some Chief or

important guest. He was the one chosen to make presents from the princes to men, women and children whose performances during the dancing were outstanding.

Everywhere he passed they called him "Son-of-man." That was the local title for crown-prince, or even Chief-designate. And before he left Small Monje the District Officer invited him to his house where he treated him with regal dignity. He had, as a matter of fact, become a Chief already. And he liked the idea.

The "catching ceremony", the event that was to place the crown on his head, was fixed for the fifteenth day of the new moon. This was the moment he thought most appropriate to clear his mind and path of all impurities. First he was to tell Vicky off. Then he was to resign his appointment as a Government Teacher as soon as he was crowned.

Chapter Forty-Four

The very first piece of news he received when he arrived Likume was very sad – Eru had died the week before and had been buried. Commy led him to the Catholic cemetery where he laid a wreath, and made a brief prayer. Inflamed by the death of his friend he went straight to Vicky's father's compound.

Vicky was at home. He did not greet her, and did not answer her greetings. He strolled in, fuming with all the anger he could muster to effect and perhaps justify the decisions he had made.

"Vicky, why did you not attend my father's funeral?" he asked her from his standing position.

Vicky did not answer.

"When that your father died, was I not there with you?"

Vicky was patiently silent until she was sure he had finished talking. Then she took her time and told him:

"Tony, I am your wife, or I continue to call myself so."

Silence.

"Your people know me to be your wife. There is no other road to Small-Monje except through this Likume here. You passed through here and went home without stopping to see me, your wife! Without asking whether your wife had gone or was still behind. I was still here, waiting, waiting, because I thought that my Husband would never pass to Small Monje without seeing me. I only heard from people that you had already reached home."

Silence.

"You have been for two weeks. I have been waiting that you will send word for me to come. You did not. You only come now to ask why I did not attend your father's funeral. How could I know why you passed through here without saying a word to me?"

"You should have known if you were my true wife." Antony said.

"I now know that I am not," Vicky told him boldly. An extremely long silence ensued during which they stared uneasily at each other. Vicky had always been a timid girl, at least as far as her relationship with Antony went. But his long and calculated absence together with memories of all his absurd reactions towards her since they got married, had hardened her spirits.

The worst of these memories was Antony's last visit to Likume; his refusal to eat anything prepared by her, his refusal to share the same bed with her, and his determination to keep her out of all his conversations. She made no reference to any of these tribulations she had suffered at his hands. She only remained silent. It was Antony who looked eager to talk. He looked at her fixedly, gathered all the courage he still had in him into one breath and told her:

"Vicky, whatever the case, I have come down today to tell you that I have pretended enough.... I think by now you should have known that we were never meant to be married to each other. I have always been a man of principles. This I made clear to you the very first day we met. And one of my principles I considered before coming here today is this: if a couple cannot live happily as husband and wife, they ought to stay apart, no matter the reasons involved. By staying apart I mean divorce! If a man hates a woman he should not pretend about it. He shall be failing in his duty.

"You know what happened to me on our honeymoon bed. You know what happened to me for weeks after that. The long and short of it is that it cut you from me permanently. I have come here now to tell you that, rather than mock the sacred bond of marriage, let us dissolve it. I want you therefore to know that from today I will only know you as Vicky Godsabi, what you were before I married you. Not, and never more Mrs. Antony Nkoaleck. I am sorry about it, but I cannot help it. I only act on principles."

Vicky did not betray the slightest worry. She only stared on blackly. Her silence angered Antony. He searched the pocket of his coat from which he drew out a sheet of paper and then holding it carelessly before her, inquired:

"Do you know this bullshit, Vicky?"

There was no response.

"In any case, whether you know it or not, I will tell you what it is. It is that thing which we once signed, calling it a marriage certificate. This is my own copy."

Silence

"You have yours. Since it has no value to me I would like you to have it."

He placed it on her knees. She said nothing, did not budge. It glided over her knee and fell on the floor. He picked it up again and in a fit of anger tore it into bits saying:

"Perhaps you think I am joking. This is to let you know how I mean you to take what I am saying."

He drew the bits on the floor and walked out.

Vicky smiled and shook her head.

"You should have torn me too into pieces," she said. Antony was too angry to hear her.

Antony visited his aunt and then Dr. Mandieg.

"I am married again," he told his aunt. The old woman was not surprised. She only said:

"I think that at this rate you will marry just as many as your father."

Antony smiled. At Dr. Mandieg's he told him about the "catching ceremony." He also personally invited the doctor to come and watch him sail into the throne.

"I will surprise you," Dr. Mandieg said.

"How, doc?"

"I will attend."

Chapter Forty-Five

When Antony learnt that his father had died, and that he was being requested to be present for the funeral, he wrote a letter to Zaché telling him why his return would be delayed. Then he proceeded to Small Monje, only to hear that the ceremony had been put off for another week because of heavy rains and because all the Chiefs children had not yet come.

Zaché had received the letter and had been exceedingly glad about it. The very day that he got the letter from Antony in Atule, a team of Inspectors arrived at Sigili-Mundu from Tetseale. They were on a routine visit to the Northern Provinces, but Zaché immediately made Antony Nkoaleck a major item on their programme there.

They were informed by Zaché and the *Prefet* (and confirmed by the *Lamido*) of atrocities and acts of professional misconduct Antony had consistently perpetrated. To authenticate the rumours that had cost Antony his post as “Surveillant Général,” they were told by Zaché that he had disappeared from school several weeks before they closed down for holidays. He swore he did not know where Antony had gone to.

The Inspectors had remained in Sigili-Mundu for five days, had proceeded to other colleges in the North, and had returned through Sigili-Mundu. Antony had still not reported back. Back in Tetseale they had submitted the results of their mission to the Minister of Education. A special committee had been summoned to decide the fate of such a recalcitrant teacher.

Antony had been away for three weeks. He went straight to Zaché's house when he arrived. The man was at home. But he would not answer Antony's greetings. He would not answer any questions on the way the people were feeling towards him.

As soon as he sat down Zaché opened his file, took out a letter with the seal of the Ministry of Education on it and handed over to Antony. He took it. He expected it to be a letter of transfer. Hastily and nervously he tore it open and read:

*DECISION No 00049/D/MFPRA/DEDC/CD/CEA/
Portant licenciement et résiliation du Contrat de travail de
Monsieur Antony Nkoaleck, fonctionnaire (mle I23.455 – N).*

*LE MINISTRE DE LA FONCTION PUBLIQUE ET DE
REFORME ADMINISTRATIVE,*

*VU la constitution;
VU la loi No. 23/77I du 2 Novembre 1959 portant code du travail;
VU le décret No. 18/18I du 7 Aout 1958 fixant les dispositions communes
Applicables aux Agents de l'Etat relevant code un travail;
VU l'Arreté No. 12/MFP/DT du 9 Avril 1956 déterminant les
conditions et la durée du préavis;
VU le contrat de Travail No. 22II7I/MFP/DP/SDPNF/SC/BR
du 18 Mai 1957;*

DECIDE

Monsieur Antony Nkoaleck, fonctionnaire (MLE II23.456-N) de I2ème échelon, précédement en service au ministère de l'Education Nationale au Collège Principal de Sigili-Mundu est, pour compter du 12 Juillet 1963, licencié de son emploi pour "absentéisme, tentations échecs de troubles, incitation des élèves, destruction et détournement des donnes destiné au college".

L'intéressé pourra prétendre aux frais de transport gratuity aller seulement pour lui-même et sa famille composée d'une épouse et des enfants reconnus à charge de son lieu d'affectation actuel à son village natal – Nkokonoko Small Monje (Département du Biongong).

Monsieur Antony Nkoaleck ne peut prétendre à un emploi ni dans l'Administration, ni dans les service parapublics du territoire pendant une durée de cinq (5) ans pour compter de la date de prise d'effet de son licenciement.

La présente decision sera enregistrée est communiquée partout au besoin sera ———

When he read down to the signature Antony threw his head backward, tightened his lips for one whole minute and then sat back to reread the letter. His knowledge of French was not yet very strong, but he knew what it meant. He looked across at Zaché who was staring directly into his eyes. He did not say anything to Zaché. He shook his head and sat back again, an ugly smile dallying on his trembling lips.

He had returned to Sigili-Mundu ready to quit the government service, on his own terms, not this way. It now looked like the whole world will consider him guilty. How could that be? Was not happiness in this life a cardinal principle of Ineffable Providence? And how are we to attain this if not by doing our duty honestly and whole-heartedly?

Could he possibly be wrong? Perhaps nobody wanted to be guided out of that cursed vale of fear, that vale of darkness, that fearful pit, chained with ignorance, wickedness and selfishness. No. He could not be wrong, and if he was not right, how then was man to be distinguished from the animals of the forest?

He would not do what they were tempting him to do. He would not change his planet. He would not put out the candle. At least not in the bush like Sigili-Mundu. It must burn itself out. There was still his birthright to take care of – the throne of Small Monje. They were just postponing his greatness. They could not prevent it. He would step straight from that throne into the pages of history, into literary fame. They had merely given him more gall in which he would dip his mighty pen and tell them what they had never been told about themselves how a people die.

At seven o'clock that evening, two policemen came up to Antony's house and told him that the *Prefet* had given him twenty-four hours to leave town. The *Prefet* called it a favour, but he was acting on Zaché's advice to prevent Antony from rousing emotions in the students that would disturb the smooth running of the college.

The favour came too late because Antony was already packing his things when they came. He had decided to travel early the next morning. He would not go to the Minister to protest and demand fair trial. He would simply go away to Small Monje and take care of his father's throne.

Just to ensure that he did not linger around any longer under the pretext that he could not find a lorry to transport his things, the *Prefet* had made a Land Rover available to Antony to take him as far as Atule where he decided he would remain until his coronation. The Land Rover was so small that it could take only his books and few chairs. He knew that nobody would pay anything for the bed and other chairs. Rather than abandon them to be picked up by those ungrateful natives, he took his axe and chopped the furniture into pieces. Then he poured kerosene on it and lit a match.

Before he went to sleep on the two chairs in the parlour he went up to a photographer, and arranged with him to accompany him to the college the following morning on his way out of the town. The land rover slept in front of his house with the things in it. At half-past seven in the morning the driver came. Antony put the two chairs he had slept on in the lorry, settled his accounts with his landlord and then they drove to the college compound. They picked up the photographer on the way.

The college was already in the second year, and they had so far five new teachers. All of them had been forced to side with Zaché against Antony. Zaché never stopped pointing to the removal of Antony as “*Surveillant Général*” as proof of what he would do to anybody who did not look at things his own way. Thus, even if they ever felt any real sympathy for Antony, the new teachers feared to show it.

The letter of dismissal was sticking on the college notice-board when he arrived there that morning. The students did not seem to believe that he was leaving them. It was Tuesday, and it meant that English was to occupy the first two periods in the First Form. The time-table had been especially designed to suit Zaché and hurt Antony. Tuesday was the weekly market day, and on that day people from the surrounding villages brought foodstuff to sell, which were generally rare or very expensive. The sellers usually came so early that the best items were already sold by ten o'clock. This gave Zaché time to purchase his needs.

The students rushed to stand in a line as soon as they saw Antony enter the compound. The land rover stood a little distance up the road. The “*Chef de classe*” intoned one of their favourite songs:

“My Grandfather’s Clock.” Antony had planned to teach them lots of English songs. But after two Zaché warned him to stick to the teaching of English as it was spoken and written, not sung.

However, the students loved the songs and continued to sing them whenever Zaché was absent. That morning, as they sang Antony came up, stopped them and asked them to take the second year students to permit him to address them together.

The man agreed. He went in and as soon as he took two steps in front of them they greeted:

“Goood Morrninng teacheeuur.”

It was the last greeting, and it would resound in his ears long after he had departed. He had mastered some French and was capable of making a few announcements. The previous night he had made up his mind he would show Zaché just how tough he was. He would deny him the pleasure of enjoying the fruits of his wickedness by not showing any disappointment. That morning, when the students greeted and he recalled that he would never again be their teacher, he was overwhelmed with anguish. The little French he knew vanished.

“Well, bad morning, students,” he responded.

Bad morning? What could that mean? they wondered

“My mouth is full, but I will say little. Let me first of all apologise for playing the truant with you lately.” He went on without caring whether they were understanding him or not. “That was because it had become impossible for me to be everywhere at the same time. But I meant-well. Do I deserve all this?” He shook his head sadly. “As you see on the notice-board and hear everywhere in town, *Nkoaleck has been dismissed*. It is you these little ones that Zaché has killed, not me.”

He paused and then entreated them: “Let us go out for a photograph. I want a picture of you, the children Zaché and his government think I came to destroy, the children they think I am incapable of bringing up.”

The students only caught bits and pieces of what he was saying. Yet they were moved all the same and, had he tarried a little, something violent might have erupted. As far as the suggestion of the picture went, the presence of the cameraman gave substance to their guesses.

He walked out and stood facing the door. There was first a general rush and then a sudden halt. The students then began retreating with their buttocks like frightened cattle before a sudden fire. Antony returned round to see the cause of the withdrawal. The immortal Zaché had appeared at one of the windows. Two policemen were behind him.

“Misteur Antony, do you know zhad you heuve been dismist frem my school?” he asked.

Antony smiled drily and said nothing. He waved farewell to the students and walked away to the waiting vehicle.

“Aurevoir, l’anglais,” he said and encouraged the students to do same. A few voices repeated the words. As Antony’s vehicle drove away the students stormed out of the class and stood like mourners, watching him disappear in the distance.

As the land rover began to climb out of the ranges that surrounded the little town, Antony asked the driver to stop. He climbed down. They were standing now on the crest of the arc formed by the road that rose gently from Sigili-Mundu and then tumbled suddenly southwards. Hands folded he took one last panoramic view of the place.

As indicated in the atlases, the entire country rose towards the north with Sigili-Mundu as the highest point. The town had been built in a trough on an ancient plateau range with the land draining towards the centre. He looked across from one end to the other. He saw the college building, which stood, like an oasis in a desert, projecting towards the sky like a finger of warning. It was an oasis from which no sane mortal would ever drink because Zaché had poisoned it.

He turned away from Sigili-Mundu to face the rest of the country. It seemed engulfed in a blanket of almost impenetrable mist. The most he could see were a few metres in front of him. The rest of the journey would be one sharp descent until it hit rock bottom in Nkokonoko Small Monje. The wind started blowing violently and he actually had to hurry into the vehicle. They drove down and away.

Chapter Forty-Six

Antony arrived at Atule on the brink of an emotional breakdown. No amount of rationalisation would lighten the burden of the ministerial decision. No resolution to ignore or forget about it would suffice. It was not enough to remind himself at every breath that within a few weeks he would be sitting on the throne-the first and perhaps only Paramount Chief in the whole continent of Africa, with a Master's degree, and who was also a writer. He would write the book that would change the face of the earth. But it would never be forgotten that he had been dismissed. That was already history, and he would bear that dishonour all his life. Sorry.

News of the dismissal puzzled Namnde greatly. He had not believed the story of Antony's father's death until he had gone to Small Monje and returned to Atule. He had often listened to Antony with much respect, and so the news made him wonder whether his judgement of Antony as a serious and devoted young man had not been hasty. When he reconsidered the problem that Antony's distress was sure to cause to his niece he tried to console him. He told Antony:

"As far as education goes, you have passed the level to be worried to that extent by dismissal from a government appointment. It's the same as a departmental transfer because the country is overflowing with para-stratals and private firms. It is even a blessing that you did Economics along with your political science. Any of the firms will pay you twice or even thrice what the government pays. All that about your being excluded from para-public jobs is nonsense. Every disappointment is a blessing."

Antony would not be comforted. He reflected on the implications of the dismissal: it made no sense from any possible angle. Sigili-Mundu needed his services, just in the same way that its inhabitants needed food, water and air to survive.

"I will not work," he told Namnde with sullen decision.

"So what do you intend to do with your life after now?"

"If I shall have any more life left in me," Antony said with great foreboding, "my father's throne is there for me to take care of. To rule is to work.

Antony's fate threw Mercy into greater bewilderment than ever before. He had assured her that he had pardoned her. But she was still plagued by a sense of guilt. Belatedly she had come to believe that Antony's devotion to her was based on pure sincere love, not stupidity.

Yet she could not see herself as the wife of a local Chief. She had hoped that she would be able to convince him to give up the idea after she shall have helped to transfer him to Tetseale. With the news of his dismissal, that did not look feasible any more. She sat with Antony all day and slept with him on the same bed all night, trying to give him all the solace she could afford.

Antony would talk of nothing else but the throne. And that was the one thing she honestly did not want to hear. He compelled Mercy to see that it had become the only thing left on this earth to salvage his crushed ego. With these thoughts also came new waves of doubt and apprehensions. He felt his mind and heart condemned to uncertainties forever. Although he spoke of future success, he counted on his sense of duty, probity, integrity and his single-mindedness. All these had been assailed and killed in him, or converted into vague terrors that stalked all the waking hours of his life, or became bloodcurdling nightmares when he slept.

The world instantly shrank into a dark cave stinking foully of excrement and diseased bodies of humans who breathed out the stench into which their foul souls and consciences had by their own wills dissolved. He saw his past life with the efforts and writings unpublished as an almost imperceptible ripple on an ocean of time.

His anxiety affected his speech. Words strayed into his speech that did not have any bearing on the topic at hand, making his talk virtually meaningless at such moments. Mercy feared he would go insane. More than once she mentioned it to her uncle, who also had similar fears.

Towards the end of the fourth day there was some improvement. Almost immediately Antony himself began to fret about his life he expressed the fear that he might not live long. And in direct contradiction to his austere life and philosophy he resolved that he would not allow himself to die without enjoying any of the excitements that money could fetch.

He had saved nearly everything he got as arrears. His intentions from the beginning had been to use the money to build a house for his aunt or give a scholarship to a child in college. Now he abandoned those plans.

"I need a care," he told Mercy to inform Namnde. When the man came he said: "I have about 500.000 francs in the bank, and I want to mount the throne of Small Monje from a car. I want a car – second hand or third hand. One that falls within that price range."

"What make?"

"Any."

"You drive?"

"Perfectly. I have a license which only requires renewal. I was in a driving school in Accra. Just that I have not tried it since reaching here."

Namnde was extremely very reluctant to undertake the mission. Antony, he argued, was not in the best mental state to own and drive a car. But Antony insisted so strongly that he was forced to yield. After all there was money. Besides, it had become the only thing he talked about when he was not talking about his crown. Mercy too liked the idea of the car very much. She would soon learn how to drive, and often when her husband was not using the car she would drive it about the town. Some consolation!

Within a week Namnde had found a second-hand Renault-6. He took Antony to the dealer and the two examined it carefully. Finally Antony decided he would buy it. It cost him 300.000 francs and it was Antony who drove it back home.

Three weeks after his dismissal Antony left Atule to attend the *catching ceremony*. It was going to be mere formality. The title was securely his. The trauma of his dismissal had subsided, but Mercy

and Namnde thought he should not go alone. Mercy decided to keep him company to and from Small Monje. Namnde told him to return to Atule immediately after the ceremony because it looked like he might be able to get a job in a Fertiliser Company owned and managed by a friend of his.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Antony arrived at the palace a little after eight o'clock the following morning. He came alone. The DO was to come with Mercy later at ten o'clock. His own wife had gone to the Coast about a month before, and Antony had told him that he did not want his people to know that he was married again, until after his coronation. The DO had agreed to do him the favour of keeping the secret.

Nchindia and all the other princes were already present. Antony did not seem to be in a mood to talk to anybody. And even if he was, tradition forbade any conversation among the princes at this stage of the ceremony. They all knew the various personalities that would be caught, and in what order.

There was first of the entire Chief. He was the most important person. Next came his *Nkwetta* his second in command, and the *chamberman*. The *Nkwetta* was the man who dressed the Chief, knew most about the Chief and determined what was to be considered a secret and what to be made public. He was always very instrumental in influencing the Chief's judgement in choosing his successor. He could also be a cousin or nephew. But he had to be one who had shown a lively interest in the affairs of the royal family, was known to be honest, and was also a man whose opinions were generally respected. In the event of a sudden death of the Chief he usually acted as regent. All the others were also children of the late Chief who laid claim, however tenuous, to the throne but could not be chosen Chief, for one reason or the other.

The third person to be caught was the *Assa'h*, and the fourth was the queen mother, the *Ankwetta*. There was also the *caller* or *Ntongntong*. This was a very important office, but only next to the *Chamberman*, in the inner committee of three. He was the one who carried all-important messages to other chiefs, and to the government officials in the district. If the Chief wanted any particular woman

at any particular time he was the one who bore the message. His office too did not require any blood relationship with the reigning Chief.

Three or four other persons were usually added to this number of people. This was partly to intensify the excitement of the ceremony, but mainly to deify the hands of the catchers. The catchers were usually credited with the supernatural powers. That was why the number of princes to participate in the ceremony was six, even though not all of them were going to be needed.

The divine right of the Biongong saying that “if a man chooses in the dark and chooses rightly, then the gods guided his hands,” evolved from this part of the ceremony. before a Chief died he chose his successor. But the popular belief was that even the Elders who had helped him make the choice, did not know who was to be caught on the day of the catching ceremony. This way, the ceremony achieved sublimity in that the man the “catcher” under the mask eventually caught was the man who had been chosen by the late Chief. Since the “catcher” too was masked at the time he laid his hands on the new Chief, it was masked at the time he laid his hands on the new Chief, it was believed that it was the gods who guided him.

The candidates were stripped to their underpants and then dressed in the traditional style. A rope of fox-skin was tied round the waist of each of them. A large well-dyed bluish-black loin cloth was hung on it and allowed to overlap behind, passed between the legs, hung and allowed to overlap in front. The cloth was then adjusted to mid-way down the thighs, in front and behind. The belly, arms, the forehead and legs were smeared with thick palm oil past – made supposedly from a melange of the pulverised bone of their ancestors, and three-sliced kola-nuts, all churned to a creamy paste. A thick bluish-black, slightly perforated cloth was worn over the head to cover the face and shoulders, reaching even to the breast. Two large cords of cowries and a much larger one of blue beads was put over it, round the neck to keep the cloth in place. A large band was then tied across the forehead and two feathers-one of an eagle and the other of an owl, were stuck to the head. That was the way the Biongong dressed their princes before a catching ceremony.

They moved to the door of the chamber in which they were dressed and stood, waiting. Two gunshots rang out, followed immediately by shouts and screams from women. This was accentuated by very loud drumming. That was to announce the entry of the highest of the Paramount Chiefs who had attended the ceremony. It indicated the formal opening of the ceremony.

The door of the dressing room was thrown open. Antony felt a cold shiver and a momentary prickle, a quickening of the blood and a louder and vigorous vibration of the heart beat. But that was normal, he thought. Every human being is bound to feel some sort of nervousness before any momentous event in his life. Even Nchindia who knew that he was there only to accompany Antony to his throne felt very uneasy too. But he was glad that after that moment Antony would be the Chief as he always prayed. It was almost as if to make Antony the Chief was to crown him too. He was pleasantly nervous.

Ngobefuo led the way, holding the hand of the first prince. They were all supposed to be blind, and so had to be led. But they saw all right - it was all make-belief. He himself was dressed in his traditional attire. A piece of tiger skin ran across his forehead with several tiny bells attached to the edges so that they gave a long tingling sound each time he shook his head. And he shook it often. Round his neck was a bunch of blue beads and three bangles on either arm with a number of little leather bags of some charm adorning them.

The masked princes, clung hand-in-hand, followed him, dancing in the traditional manner, dignifying, zig-zag. As the last prince stepped into the arena, the masquerades of the late Chief sprang to their feet. They were immediately followed by the masquerades which the other Chiefs had brought. They mingled with the princes and danced amidst great rejoicing and drumming, until the group reached the seats that had been prepared for the princes at the far right of the dusty ground. A Biongong catching ceremony was never complete without a display of masquerades.

The sky was a hard blue, with hardly a cloud, and it was evident that it was going to be a very bright day. Behind the masked princes was a crowd of the late Chief's own people – villagers from far and

near. Directly in front of the princes now seated on isolated stools were the drummers, their bare backs etched as if in toil, poised for action in the bright morning sun of Nkokonoko Small Monje. Bubbles of sweat could be seen rolling down from all sides of their hardened bodies. And they had not even begun the real thing!

To the left of the drummers, and thus facing the princes, was a galaxy of celebrities. First was the DO. He was sitting under a shade of palm fronds. On either side of him stood three policemen, armed to the teeth, ready to charge if need be. Blood was said to have been spilled at some catching ceremonies where affairs were not carefully handled. The DO too, for all the security, was stiff with nervousness. And with good reasons too. Although every effort had been made to disguise the candidates for the throne, he saw that Antony still commanded a sitting position that could imply a lot of things. Antony had come in first, and was now sitting at the beginning of the line nearest to him. And the DO still remembered how vehemently he had been opposed the previous evening. He still could not trust the Elders. Their promise might have been a mere deceit. When it came to upholding a tradition, experience had taught him that old men could make very unfaithful allies. He mopped sweat from his face and sat quietly.

Behind him was Mercy, Antony's wife. She too was tense and nervous. She had come with her camera to take pictures of the ceremony. So far she had taken only two pictures. But she was not ready to continue because she seemed to be attracting too much attention. People kept pointing at her. Behind Mercy stood Dr. Samkwere Mandieg who managed to reach Small Monje only that morning. He was responding to the invitation from Antony to come and watch him mount the throne of Small Monje. Dr. Mandieg had never witnessed a catching ceremony and so was anxious to be present to see somebody he knew personally being caught as Chief. He had developed a very special interest in Antony following his concern for his late friend Eru.

A little way to the right of the DO were four Paramount Chiefs, colourfully dressed and sitting in two groups under four large equally colourful umbrellas. Every Chief was attended by two servants (one in the case of a Sub Chief), who fanned him gently with a large fan of feathers.

Between the two groups of Chiefs was a large throne with tiger skin at its foot. Two elephants tusks, each borne by a slave stood on either side. That was the much-coveted throne for the new Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje. It was empty.

Behind the throne stood an 18 year old virgin with healthy bulbous breast. She wore a bunch of cowries on her neck and round her waist. The only other articles of clothing on her were thin flaps of tiger skin hanging from her waist – one in front and the other behind. Her face and body were smeared with the same cream substance as the princes. She was the girl to be used, as the custom demanded, to wash the new Chief's *Leukot*.

The drums beat on and on. Drinks and kola-nuts were served round. They were just at the beginning of things. The dancers appeared in their various age groups, the arrival of each being preceded by a display of masquerades. Clouds of dust rose and fell. First to come were the very little girls, stark naked, but for bundles of beads round their waists.

Masquerades.

The elderly dancers came in. A man and woman first stepped in and put a display calculated to introduce to the younger ones the finer aspects of the art. Trunks bare, arms akimbo, they cocked their ears in the direction of the drums, stood motionless for a spell-binding second and then began. Feet and hands moved vigorously and methodically, but to the rhythm of the thumping of the drums. First to the left back to the starting point, then to the right, back, forwards, back, backwards, back, they danced on, weaving curious lines with their toes on the ground, flexing and unflexing their muscles.

Although there was something of a cattle cry in the shouts, the rhythm of the music was wrenching and contagious. It was impossible for anybody to keep his feet still. Not even Father Preston, the Parish Priest to whom every local ceremony was held outside the church was reminiscence of the bloody human sacrifices that were once said to be characteristic of Africa. He found himself nodding, smiling, knocking his knees together as the tempo rose higher and higher. And when the music stopped and the two dancers walked off amidst enthusiastic cheers, he was not embarrassed to find that he was the only one among the important guests who had risen to his feet to applaud. Africa, he hated to admit, still had something to offer to the cultural civilisation of the modern world.

It was the turn of girls of marriageable ages. They were followed by old men and old women, all naked, save for thin flaps of blush black cloth, just broad enough to cover their private parts.

The drums beat on, the children, girls, men and women now mingled with the masquerades wore out their feet from the sheer joy of dancing.

A fusillade of gunshots exploded.

A hush fell.

Ngobefuo appeared again. This time he was flanked by some half dozen well-fed younger men – pretending to be very furious. These were called “*belebelele*” or simply the “*beaters*”. As soon as a Chief was caught he was given what was regarded as the traditional last beating because thereafter he would never be beaten again.

Normally the beating was not supposed to be serious. But sometimes Chiefs emerged really bruised from the exercise, because the beaters had included men with real grievances against the new Chief. That was why of late the beaters had been chosen from outside the new Chief’s relatives – from people who had no claims to the throne at all.

Ngobefuo poured the libation in front of the princes and then moved to the empty throne where he did same. He then went to the other Chiefs, calling on the gods of their fathers’ the gods of their fathers’ fathers, and those of their fathers’ fathers’ fathers to send down their blessings on their activities. Then as he went back with the buffalo horn from which he poured the libations the guns fired again. Just then the other Elders engaged the princes in frenzied dancing in separate groups.

The drums ran mad. While they were still at it Ngobefuo came back, now masked. He was led by the hand until he reached the centre of the action. He raised his hand. There was silence. He walked straight on to the midst of the dancing princes and seized a man. The guns burst out again. The man screamed, the drums joined. The new Chief had been caught. But it had been done so swiftly that Antony who kept imagining hands gripping him from behind, did not see how it all happened. He had been left out.

Almost immediately everything went wrong. Just when the other Chiefs rose and were waving their fly whisks in the air and leading the young virgin to go and intervene in the beating and bring back the new Chief to his throne, several things happened. First of all

one of the princes removed his mask, or rather tore it off his face. He was Antony Nkoaleck. The ceremony had reached its most climatic moment, but the drums stopped beating at once.

An ominous silence fell. Antony had done very great wrong. Whatever grievances he had, however unfairly he felt he had been treated, there was the committee of Elders through which he could channel his complaints. It was wrong, very wrong for him to unmask. That was usually done only after the caller had been caught. To ignore this detail was to ignore a very important element in the tradition of the catching ceremony. And he did not stop there. He tore off the sacred band, broke the two feathers and threw them on the dust along with the beads and cowries. Then he crowned his sacrilege by using the mask to wipe the mess that had been smeared on his body.

The old men could not believe what they were seeing. They ground their teeth and stared on. Only the fact that he would be left naked prevented him from cutting off the huge loin cloth too and leaving it there on the ground with the rubbish. That would have been ruled out as outright lunacy. But nobody would have been surprised because there was insanity enough in what he had done so far. Leaving every shattered traditional clothing or decoration on the ground he strode dementedly into the dressing chamber.

None of the acts had ever happened before in the history of the catching ceremony anywhere.

Worse still, the newly caught Chief had not only beaten his way out of the grip of the beaters but had fled out of the scene of the whole ceremony. One of the beaters could even be seen bleeding on the ground.

The tribe had therefore been disgraced. As everybody knew, there was only one punishment for such an outrage-castration. Even after the coming of the white man with his "four eyes" Biongong people never took very serious offenders of their tradition to court. They arrested, tried and punished in secret, and the victims were bound by an oath to suffer in silence.

But the new Chief's conduct was also another act of disgrace for the tribe as far as their tradition went. Were they therefore to castrate a Chief? That was a Biongong metaphor for attempting the impossible. To do such a thing or even contemplate doing it was an abomination worse than what the Chief might have done.

Were they to castrate the young man Antony who had just been robbed of his crown? Would it be fair for a young man who had lost his crown to lose his balls too? The Biongong people have a saying that *if a man is to fall into a pit, it must not be the same person who is falling from a tree*. And to show mercy to a man like that who had so deliberately insulted the customs and traditions of the tribe was a sign of weakness which could never be associated with the regime of Ngobefuo. The loss of the crown was not the first palm tree from which Antony had fallen, already! And yet, down below him, there were pits, waiting anxiously to swallow him up.

The police still did not intervene because as far as the DO was concerned, nothing very serious had yet happened to warrant the use of brute force. But the DO soon began to feel nervous, uneasy, tense, even afraid, quite unlike the previous hour. Could it be a conspiracy by Ngobefuo and his clique of Elders to disrupt the whole occasion? Could it be a mere accident? Could it be that the new Chief actually wanted the throne but feared that Antony could do him bodily harm? In any case, he should have seen that, that was why the policemen had been brought in.

While the DO sat turning over these bitter thoughts in his mind Antony emerged again, dressed in his own clothes, the kola-nut paste now very wet with sweat, showed through his yellow shirt and grey trousers, staining everything deep brown. He matched straight up to the DO and, ignoring his wife's efforts to restrain him from any violent reactions, he said:

"Sir, I think you had better intervene in this matter. Blood shall flow. My father's decision has been reversed. I was supposed to be the Chief as you all very well know."

The district Officer looked at him very disdainfully for a very long time and then, counting his words, he told him:

"Master Antony, I don't know about what has been denied you. No blood shall flow. Not even a drop of yours. Not in Small Monje. This is a strictly tribal affair. I am here to recognise any Chief the people choose. I simply cannot intervene as you think, you understand?"

Antony turned away without a word and walked up to Ngogefuo: "I want to speak to the Elders."

"They too want to speak to you, Nkoaleck. Now, follow me," Ngobefuo said fearlessly. Antony followed him to the chamber again, anger simmering in both men's breasts. The other Chiefs followed. In the light of Antony's misconduct, nobody, not even Ngobefuo regretted not giving the throne to such a monster. There, in the chamber Antony opened his mouth to speak but it was Ngobefuo who spoke first:

"Before you say anything Nkoaleck, we want to ask you why you have humiliated and insulted us all in public like this. This is not the first Chief we are catching. But never before in the history of any people has a son lifted the cloth off the buttocks of his fathers in broad day light as you have done like this."

"That was because nothing of this sort had ever happened," Antony blasted back.

"Of what sort?" Ngobefuo snarled.

"Where a dead Chief's decision is reversed," Antony spat out.

There is a Biongong saying that *unless an elephant falls they never start cutting it up*. In everybody's opinion Antony, that once very mighty white elephant had at last fallen to the ground. What then prevented anybody from cutting him up? Ngobefuo took the lead and drew out his knife he cleared his throat and spat the thick yellow mucus out carelessly on the floor and rubbed his foot over it several times. But the floor was rough and as he abandoned the job the mess could be seen still sticking dottedly in the cracks and holes on the floor. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and asked:

"Nkoaleck, who told you that you were to be the Chief?" The DO entered and stood in the limelight. Ngobefuo looked at him very sternly and then turning to Antony continued:

"Who told you?"

Antony was silent for a brief second and then said:

"People. You people."

"I?"

Antony was silent.

"Anyway, Nkoaleck, hear me," Ngobefuo began softly. "Whatever you heard, know that in catching a Chief, the dead speak from the grave. You have presumed too much on our old age and thought us

blind when we still had our eyes open on our faces. You thought us deaf when we still had our ears open ...our son, you have done too much. They say *if a man sits in the lavatory and does not stop scratching his buttocks he will by and by touch ecrement*. You scratched your buttocks and you were warned. You did not listen.... Know that a man is not Chief until he has been caught. Forget the background of the little boy. We shall wash him and mould him into a Fuo-Ndee.

"The whole country talks of you. And whenever your name is mentioned it is only a thing of shame. Nkoaleck has insulted the tribe in Likume. Nkoaleck has insulted the goment. Nkoaleck has driven his own tribe's girl from his house. Then as if this is not enough, Nkoaleck has married a Numchi girl. A prince who would have been our Chief! These are things with which parents frighten their childrenNkoaleck, our fathers will forgive us because such a thing has never happened before. There was nothing else for us to do. The goment has dismissed Nkoaleck from work. But Nkoaleck tells us that he has left the goment to help us. No, Nkoaleck, no. we shall not become dogs for the sake of a bone."

Antony stood silent, chewing his lips, unable to refute a single accusation. Then licking his mouth now totally dried of spittle he asked, looking at the DO:

"Who said I have married a Numshi girl?"

Ngobefuo spoke again:

"Do not ask us that. We are not blind. We have the eyes to see the tracks of a man who carries wood ash in a basket. That girl sitting outside with a child in her stomach is a Numshi girl. She is your wife."

"So what?" Antony blasted.

"So nothing. We are just telling you how much you do not know we know. And while we are still alive like this, we advise you to go and pour libations over your father's grave and ask for forgiveness because this kind of thing which you have caused to happen has never happened before. I am saying so for the..."

"Rubbish. Nonsense. Stupid. If you thought so much of my father's grave, you should not have changed his words..."

"And you are insulting us even here and now?"

"Yes, I am. You hear me? I am insulting you."

"And you have disgraced the tribe in public?"

“Yes,”

“I want to tell you that following the tradition under which we were born, you are going to be castrated....”

“Who is to be castrated, Ngobefuo? Who?”

“You, Nkoaleck,”

Antony smiled dryly and, advancing towards him and holding his hands behind him and trusting his belly at Ngobefuo in a comic gesture said desperately:

“Castrate me. Come and castrate your mothers, Ngobefuo. Idiots like you.”

Eyes red as blood he strode out, defying castration, crossed the arena of the last time to his wife, held her hand and in a dreadful silence left the palace.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The DO abandoned the ceremony in the heat of that confusion to pursue Antony. Antony's rejection was not enough, he thought. So long as he had those his manuscripts with him, he constituted a danger to the reputation of the country. So as soon as he heard Antony drive away in the direction of his house he left with his officers. His Land Rover and Antony's car arrived at his residence almost at the same time, and Antony had hardly climbed down from the car when his vehicle pulled up and stopped behind him. He climbed down and asked:

"Mr. Antony what do you want from this house?"

"My things, my valise. My clothes. My wife's things. Our clothes.

"Don't enter."

"Then how do I get my...."

"They will be brought to you. There." The DO looked over his shoulder and noticed that a blue Peugeot 404 had pulled up after him. He hesitated for a while and then walked up furiously to the man on the wheel.

"Anything I can do for you? Who are you?"

"I am Samkwere Mandieg, Chief Medical Officer in charge of the Likume General Hospital."

"Glad to know you, doctor. Anything I can do for you?"

"Antony is my friend. He invited me to the ceremony."

Antony looked across at him. He had forgotten that he sent Mandieg an invitation. When Antony saw him he tried in vain to smile.

"As you see, doctor," the DO resumed. "Your friend is giving us in the administration very much trouble."

While Dr. Mandieg stood wondering how he could intervene to save Antony from further embarrassment, an officer was sent to go in and fetch the things. When he brought them out the DO gave orders for the boxes to be opened.

“Why sir?” Antony asked, dazed with wrath and frustration.

The DO repeated his orders to the officer without answering his question. The officer sat down to work, opening the boxes and throwing up a series of very nauseatingly soiled underpants and other articles of clothing which Antony and Mercy had used on their journey to Small Monje. They had intended to preserve them and wash them after the ceremony, either in Small Monje or back in Atule.

“Look at the pants of the man who wants to become the Paramount Chief of my district,” he said pointing to an ugly blot that ran across the centre of one of the pants.

Antony turned towards Mercy. She was still in the car, watching, paralysed by the thoughts of what she knew the entire exercise meant to Antony. Antony turned back and looked on with powerless fury. The officer who did the searching went on, ignorant of what he was looking for. When he came to Antony’s file the DO strode across to him and said:

“Put that aside.”

“I need that file very much, sir,” Antony pleaded helplessly.

The DO did not answer him.

“Search that car. Take out every piece of paper,” he told the officer. Mercy was also ordered down immediately, while the officer went about his tedious job, throwing out every single piece of paper. When he was sure that he had finished he clicked his heels and saluted.

The DO nodded and asked him to search Antony too.

“What right have you to order all this to be done to me, sir?” Antony asked in a quavering voice. “Every right,” the DO said with the most insulting arrogance, they searched him down to his pants, removing every document which the DO could not understand, and which he therefore considered dangerous. When the officer clicked his heels again the D.O told him to put the ransacked boxes into Antony’s car.

He asked for a gallon of kerosene from his kitchen. When this was brought he poured it himself on Antony’s manuscripts and struck a match. The pile of papers began to blaze before Antony’s own eyes.

“Mr. Antony, get into that ya car and drive out of here,” he ordered in a freezing tone.

Antony stood as though the words had not been directed at him – motionless, silent. Not that he now decided to disobey the orders of the DO. He wished he had the nerve to disobey him. After all what could be worse? He seemed to be in a trance. He felt he was not in the right frame of mind for driving a car.

It had taken him five full minutes to fit the key into the ignition hole when he climbed out of the palace gates. When he had finally succeeded in starting the engine he had driven for about ten yards before realising that his own door had not been shut. It was Mercy who had detected the error and informed him.

Even if he could drive, where was he to go to? To Atule? What else could be lying in wait for him there but continuous insults, failures and disappointments? And he must leave Nkokonoko Small Monje!

Perhaps just a word of comfort from Mercy might have brought him back to himself, at least for the few seconds necessary to decide and leave and escape any further humiliation. But she too was equally stunned by the sudden and disconcerting turn of events.

She had not prayed or hoped things would happen in this appalling way. She had expected him to be caught and crowned as he himself had said to her, and as everybody had been anticipating. And as soon as that was done she had hoped to convince Antony to abandoning the office to some caretaker as he himself had casually intimated.

She had come to understand precisely what place the crown of Small Monje occupied in his life at that particular point in time. She therefore knew immediately that there was nothing anywhere to adequately compensate him for the rejection. This was what so disturbed her and made it hard for her to try to console him.

The DO had stood watching the fire consume the manuscripts. As soon as the embers began to abate he turned and was already walking away towards his house when he heard Antony ask:

“What have I done to deserve all this sir?” The voice was usually hoarse with desperation and futility.

The DO stopped, turned with impudent dignity and then said sarcastically:

“Nothing, Mr. Antony. You are being persecuted for nothing.” The voice was soft but the tone very grave. There was a moment of silence. Then, like a cobra spitting out venom, he said between clenched teeth:

“That the District Officer should co-operate with you to falsify a legal document, a duly signed marriage certificate. To change it from Monogamy, to polygamy without the consent of your wife! And knowing that last month in Likume you insulted the law of this state by tearing another marriage certificate into bits. And you have mistreated and finally abandoned a girl who was still your wife by law! You want to make senior government officials titles of books in America because we are rotten and you are pure. You still want to know what you have done to deserve all this?”

Antony did not answer. He had been leaning against the open door of his car. When the man spoke he lowered his head and looked into the car to see if Mercy had been paying any attention. Dr. Mandieg walked up to him and placing his right hand gently on his left shoulder said:

“Antony, take it easy. Join me and I’ll drive you out of here....”

“No way,” Antony said, smiling dryly. “I am OK, I can drive myself.”

Mercy was leaning over the steering wheel, her eyes fixed on Antony, wide open with disbelief and even fear. Antony raised his head sharply to hide the guilt that had suddenly implanted itself on his visage.

Just then the DO warned:

“And let me tell you again. I will hate to tell you once more to enter your car and drive out of this place.”

Antony allowed his trembling body to slide along the inside surface of the open door into the car where he sank into his seat.

He folded his hands which he placed on the steering wheel and put his head between them, staring pensively at his feet. When he lifted his head Mercy inquired worriedly:

“What was that man saying?”

There was silence.

Anthony knew she had heard everything. He knew they were all truths he could not refute, and feared the consequences of such a revelation on their future relationship. But he was too frustrated, too ashamed and too angry with himself to be able to assemble his wits and tell a lie that might make all the difference to her feelings towards him now. All he did was look across at her and smile mirthlessly. Then, heaving a heavy sigh he said imploringly:

“Mercy dear, please drive us out of this dungeon.”

Mercy had been looking directly at him when she asked him that question and when he turned and looked across at her and asked her to drive the car. She had seen only one thing delineated in every nerve on his face – undisguised guilt. And with this realisation her saint suddenly became a monster in disguise.

“Antony, you know that I do not drive,” she said with a bitter frown, her voice trembling as she spoke. “And I have asked you a question, Antony.”

Antony seemed to startle at the mention of his own name. Mercy always called him Tony. And to call him that way, it seemed to place him at a distance from her which made his depression even worse. And that was when he most needed her comfort.

“I know you have asked me a question, Mercy. But this is not the right time for me to answer.”

Mercy threw her head back violently and sank back into her seat. It was only in Atule, she resolved, that the issue would be discussed. Antony turned on the ignition key, fumbled with the gears for a few disturbing seconds and then drove away. Dr. Samkwere Mandieg took off frantically behind them, hoping to catch up with him and convince them to leave the car anywhere in Small Monje and drive with him.

He would meet Antony only two hours later, dying in the vehicle that had crushed Mercy beyond recognition in a bizarre and inexplicable accident.

THE END

*“When a writer of tragic as well as comic genius combines both in the same work, it can make very interesting reading. Linus Asong has attained that rare *mélange* in *Stranger in His Homeland*. His fabulous humour comes to the fore, so too does his somber tragedy and his breathless suspense. If this novel takes us back chronologically, it also takes us forward up the ladder of mature craftsmanship.... The central action of this novel is the tragic encounter between Antony’s complex character and a social and cultural milieu in which that character cannot truly exist with itself.”*

- Professor Richard Bjornson, Ohio State University

Stranger in His Homeland completes the long-awaited trilogy of Linus Asong’s fictitious village of Nkokonoko Small Monje, separately treated in *The Crown of Thorns* and its sequel *A Legend of the Dead*. However, it leads us back not to events after *A Legend of the Dead*, but to the crisis that created the passionately exciting *The Crown of Thorns*. Honest, enthusiastic, arrogant and self-righteous, Antony Nkoaleck, the first graduate of his tribe means well. But his society, entrenched in corruption, sees things differently and therefore judges him according to its own norms. Just one or two errors on Antony’s part are enough to cost him his job with the government, the coveted throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje, and finally his life. It is a sad story, strongly reminiscent of Myshkin’s fate in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*, a story in which the Russian novelist vividly shows the inability of any man to bear the burden of moral perfection in an imperfect world.

Linus Asong was born in the South West Region of Cameroon in 1947. With a combined B.A honours in Education, in 1980 he entered the University of Windsor in Canada whence he graduated with a terminal degree in Creative Writing. He holds an M.A and a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta, in Edmonton Canada, and is presently Associate Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Ecole Normale Supérieure Bambili (University of Yaounde 1). Asong is a stand-up humorist, a consummate portrait painter, an accomplished literary scholar, and a celebrated prolific writer with over a dozen novels to his credit.



Langaa Research & Publishing
Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Region
Cameroon

ISBN 978-9956-616-46-6



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